

Phoenix Reborn

By Mark Pasquini

Prologue

From the Journal of Zacharias Banducci

I have been neglecting this journal for the last year or so and I need to get it caught up to date. Blame it on complacency; the Aztecs, Mahdists and Fundies have been having their own problems and have pretty much left us alone except for skirmishes and such; laziness, I have been busy raising a family and exploring a location for my permanent home; busy-ness, what with raising family (four now, with the twins and building up my cattle and horse breeding business (not that I know anything except keep the biggest ones and eat or sell the rest), and getting the ranch in order. I moved to a small valley to the north of Mitchell. There isn't enough room for a lot of families but, there is only us and a hand and his wife, the Smolleks with their three children, and the cattle and horses. I felt like an old time pioneer, building a log cabin and corrals and a barn and all. I'm glad for all the friends Sarah has, though. Without their help, I would still be felling logs for the walls. We get our share of visitors, since it is only an hour or so away, in good weather.

As to Jefferson: there are more than 1000 citizens. We have fifteen troops, now, and three auxiliary troops, whose strength changes with marriages and birthdays and interest. We have spread out a little. There is a new settlement in Gold Cove, one near the headwaters of the Rio Grande and another between Mitchell and Gold Cove called Eagle. Spread among these are four troops of Rangers. I argued against spreading out like this, but was overruled. The prevailing attitude was that if the families wanted to move there, it was their choice. Put that way, I have to agree.

There is a telephone line running to the older settlements and they ran a trunk line to my place, for some reason. Olsen Thompson and Jerry Hogg set up a solar cell system to collect

energy. According to the engineers and other smart folk, these energy collection systems can use sun, moon and, the better ones, stars to collect energy. Several hundred of the new collectors and spools of light cable were found in a warehouse in Sterling, CO. There is some trouble with the lines during heavy snows or high winds, but it has improved communications tremendously.

We have a thriving agricultural and herding industry. We are exporting meat, leather, honey, wool, cheese, handicrafts, jewelry and cloth. We would be selling all our surplus crops, except for the storage during transportation. Without canning, some stuff spoils. The council decided that we need all the canning supplies we can find for our own uses and has forbidden export of the glassware.

It smacked to me of governmental interference, but I was overruled, again. We recently had a glass-maker join us from the Fundy area and he has set up a glass works factory. Maybe, he can solve the storage problem. There also is a pottery operation that may help.

The Council has set up crews to tear down buildings and salvage the fixtures in towns, farms and ranches in the areas closest to our borders. This has enabled us to eliminate shelter for reavers, raiders and settlers and stockpile a lot of equipment. When they find useful lumber, finished floors or paneling, that is salvaged, too. Our sawmills are turning out rough lumber in sufficient quantities, so far. There are a few houses in Mitchell that have been filled with toilets, glass, doors, frames, cabinets and everything else worth salvaging.

The patrols are still finding caches of stuff in stores and private homes, which we stockpile. Fasteners, cement, canned goods; weapons, etc. are all brought back. The other day they found a survivalist cache by following a faint trail behind a shed to an underground bunker. The bunker contained gallons of water; clothing; canned goods by the caseload; weapons, the usual shotguns and hunting gear, along with three crates of M-25s and thirty cases of

ammunition, two light machine guns and ammunition and a crate of six shoulder mounted missiles. How an individual got those, we will never know.

Our population has been increased through the birthrate, which Doc White considers Homeric and prolific, and an influx of disgruntled Fundies, escapees from the Mahdists and Canadians driven out by the harsh winters (By-the-way, Sarah is pregnant, again). The Mormons and Sioux have been good enough to provide escorts through their lands. There have been escaped slaves from the Fundy areas who have wanted to move to New Africa that we have escorted to the Sioux and they have passed along to the border of their lands. Father Tillford has commented that there has been a collecting of races or religions. Native Americans to the Sioux region, blacks to New Africa, Hispanics to the Aztecs, Jews to the Israelis (when we can find a way to get them to Florida through the Fundamentalists), Muslims to the Mahdists, Mormons to Deseret, etc. I argued with him about it and he pointed out our ban on Muslims. It ended like all arguments about religion and politics.

The Mormons have been proselytizing, but require that converts move to Deseret to increase the population there. As soon as they have filled up their territory, I imagine that the requirement will be dropped. The Sioux are still forbidding any non-Native Americans from settling there, but they have, increasingly, been allowing those with up to a quarter Indian blood in. They have been collecting tribal records, as they or we find them.

The Confederacy, if you can call it that, had a close call. Columbia and Washington had a shooting war. It only lasted for a few days and there weren't many casualties, but it could have escalated into something major. Luckily, there was a trade delegation from Monroe visiting Washington and they managed to get the two sides to the table. They offered to arbitrate and were able to get both sides to agree to a boundary and extradition laws. One of the 'bones

of contention' was a rock near Lake Chelan, which overlooked the lake and boys from the Washington side would use to view the bathing habits of the Columbian girls. Somehow, they thought that getting that piece of territory would keep the boys away.

The Aztecs were pretty quiet, except for a raid over the border that attacked a new settlement in the Imperial Valley. They killed about half of the settlers and drove off the rest and all of the cattle before burning the town and escaping. The Bear Flaggers have set up a force modeled on our Rangers and have deployed them along the border.

We have an economic system that would probably have Walter Williams, the turn of the century economist, rolling over in his grave. There is no basis for a rate of exchange and the printing of money. There is very little demand for gold or silver, except for jewelry and decorations. We have a barter system, of course. Person A has something person B wants and they trade. Simple. The problem came up when someone needed something from general stores. All scavenged goods went to general stores and were drawn from there, but we found that some people were always taking more than they needed or the best of what there was.

And there were a few who didn't do any work and were demanding that the rest of us supported them. All well and good for a Socialist regime, but not for us. We hit upon a plan for bartering labor for goods, using an auction. It was a little complicated, at first, and there were adjustments, but it worked out pretty well. If someone did a job for me, we agreed on a unit of exchange, say, a cattle drive was forty-eight hours of labor. A cow was worth twelve hours of labor. At the end of the drive he would have four cows. The problem was what he was going to do with four cows. He could turn them over to the common herd, but then someone would have to look after them and what would that cost. We solved that by my giving him a paper, under my name, worth forty-eight hours. With that he bought common items, like shirts, food, munitions,

etc., at the store, using my script. When I sold my cattle to the store, they paid me in my script or I could build a credit or turn in script from someone else for my script. Larger or rare items, like furniture, horses, wagons, etc., were auctioned off every Tuesday and Thursday night for script. No one could have more than forty hours in script outstanding at the store. To redeem, mandatory after forty hours, or earn script from the 'government', one could do public works, like build bridges, herder to the 'government' herds, serve in the military or any number of tasks. To keep inflation in check, the 'government' couldn't just print script, but only keep a certain amount in circulation. The brains figured out how much. This is pretty much beyond me, but it seems to work

Of course, you could always go off and scavenge for yourself, but you ran the risk of encountering Mahdists, Fundies, Aztecs or Reavers and then you were on your own. And, the aged, infirm, young or handicapped are taken care of regardless of ability to 'pay'. As I say, it was an interesting system and I am sure that it will break, eventually. For trade outside Jefferson, we used barter, exclusively.

Well, things have been too quiet and I suspect that this lull is about over.

Chapter 1

The Aztecs

Spring 2045

What did I say! Today Paul Erickson of the Third Rangers came in to report that there is a force of Aztecs marching towards Deseret. They have reached the area around Cedar City. What's that famous saying? "Let loose the dogs of war".

Ed was in the war room when Zach, Carl, Hans and Peter Vogel arrived. Paul was standing before the situation map on the wall, pointing to the area into which the Aztecs had moved. That was two days ago.

"Mike sent off two men to warn the Mormons, a man to Gold Cove and me to report here. The rest of the half-troop of the Second Rangers is tailing the Aztecs. They are making about, oh, ten to twelve miles a day," he reported, after greeting the newcomers.

Ed interjected, "I sent out the call to assemble the troops to meet at the Back Door tomorrow at dawn. Go on, Paul."

"Well, we rough-counted two thousand men. Most were infantry. We couldn't get too close, 'cause they had cavalry out pretty far. There were five tanks, a bunch of trucks and, at least, one tanker, maybe a smaller one, too," Paul continued, and then in almost a whisper, he said, "They had a plane."

"A plane," Hans ejaculated. "What kind of plane?"

"It, it was a small one. A piper or that kind. It had two engines, made a lot of noise."

“Prop job,” Peter, a recruit from the Fundies, mused. “The only good it could do is observation and dropping small bombs. Kind of like the WWI planes. It could have a couple of men with machine guns to strafe, but it would have to get pretty low to be very effective and then it would be subjected to ground fire.”

Zach looked at the map and measured distances. “It should take them two weeks or more to get anywhere near the Mormons. What is the most we can muster and still be able to defend this place, Ed?”

“We have fifteen troops, all told. Say, three hundred seventy-five effectives. Two troops are in the south and I don’t want to strip them away in case this is a feint and the Gold Cove is their objective. Nine Troop scavenging up around Scottsbluff and Rapid City. Another on patrol down around Amarillo. A Ranger Troop on the eastern slope of the Rockies, half watching the Mahdists and the rest the Fundies. The Mechanized Troops are here and the two tanks were recently overhauled and there is plenty of fuel, for a change.

“Of the other eight troops, two are on duty at the Front and Back doors, one is in training and the rest are scattered around the mountains doing their jobs. I figure that I can muster five troops by tomorrow morning and the other three in three days, but that would leave no one for here.”

“We can get enough auxiliaries for guard duty, along with some of the militia members to hold the fort until you can get another troop here from the valleys, you have to warn them, anyway. Leave a half-troop in each valley and bring the other one here,” Zach said. “Damn, I would like to get another tank or two.”

“Yeah, and I would like a fleet of fighter-bombers,” quipped Hans.

Ed ignored the comment and said, “That sounds like a plan, but you realize that we would be putting about one hundred and sixty men against the two thousand, plus?”

Zach turned from the map. “Okay. The Mormons will get the Dannites moving as soon as they get the message. Send a courier to the Sioux and see if they will help. Send a pigeon to the Bear Flaggers and, maybe, Monroe. Let them know what the situation is.

“I know the birds are unreliable, but it may be that we can get some help from there. Tell the Sioux that we will split the booty with them, whatever. And, if it looks like we don’t stand a chance, let the Dannites and the Aztecs fight it out and, maybe, we can pick up the pieces.”

Ed scratched his head and turned to Paul, “Get a fresh horse and let O’Malley know what we are planning. We will meet you, say, around Salina in a couple of days”

Hans stood from his seat on the desk, “I’ll get Mary Rzonka started on organizing the Auxiliary Troops and let William notify the militia to set up a guard rotation. I want to send fifteen or so militia to notify Troop Twelve and bring back the scavenging wagons and send the troop to find us.”

The team adjourned to get ready for the expedition. Ed held Zack until the rest had left. “I don’t want you to take any chances, out there. I know you want those tanks, but it’s not worth getting yourself or the others killed, you know.”

“Relax, Ed, I don’t plan on getting anyone killed. I’ll be careful, but I do want those tanks. I plan on using those SAMs we found in the bunker to take down the plane and blind them and then take the tanks, if possible. If not, then Paul and Ron can see about taking them out. I really don’t want them left in Aztec hands. Gold Cove would be too vulnerable.

“Anyway,” he grinned, “if I got myself killed, Sarah would never speak to me again.” He slapped Ed on the shoulder and headed towards the house to break the news to his, soon-to-be-angry wife.

The morning was cool and clear when the six troops set out. Ed had worked all night organizing supplies and packing horses and mules for the expedition. The tanker had been loaded and the tanks topped off and they had set off the evening before, with Second and Third Troops. The pigeons had been sent and a group of the older men had set out to meet Nine Troop.

A lot of parents and wives had assembled at the Back Door to see the troops off. Ed wished them luck and they started down the narrow trail. Many wondered when they would be back and how many.

* * * * *

Carl and Michael O’Malley lay on a low hill under cover of a copse of pines studying the camp below them. Mike had indicated that the plane was away to the North, probably scouting the Mormons. Carl put his binoculars away and motioned that they withdraw.

Once down the hill, Carl, Zach and the troop leaders and advisors listened to their report.

“They have learned a lot since the last time,” Carl began. “They have a wide picket line and a canine patrol. No one is going to sneak up on that camp.

“The good thing is that they are concentrating their attention to the North. The Mormons must have troops up there, dug in. We’ve got a hundred and ninety men, now that Nine Troop finally showed,” he nodded to Mark Pecchia and grinned.

“It looks like they are going in with a standard formation. Cavalry on the wings, infantry in the middle in several waves. My guess is that they will use the two pieces of artillery and the tanks to soften up the Dannites.” He drew a rough map in the dust.

“Now, what I think we should do; set up the three SAMs about a hundred yards behind the tanks, if they can get that close. Leave our tanks here to cover our retreat, if necessary. We can’t chance that they would be heard if we brought them closer. Send Two and Four Troops to the East and Eleven and the support from the mechanized troops to the West to cut off the tanks and the guns from their troops, but not to go in unless we have some sort of trouble. All they are there for is to freeze the cavalry and infantry in place and give the Dannites a chance to attack and cause as much confusion as possible.

“The other three troops, Nine, Fifteen and Three Rangers, will wait for the noise to begin and get as close as possible before attacking. Nine Troop will take out the gunners, Third Rangers will take out the left hand tanks, Fifteen Troop will concentrate on the other three. Use tear gas to smoke the tankers out. If you have to, drop grenades down the hatches or through the view slits to disable them.

“Any questions?”

As he finished the briefing, they heard a distant rumble as the Aztec tanks began to move. Zach scrambled up the hill and saw the camp in organized turmoil. The cavalry had swung out to the left and right; the infantry had formed up and begun marching in column towards the distant Dannites. The tanks and artillery followed slowly behind. The camp was left with a corporal’s guard, which immediately moved to the rise in front of them to view the coming battle.

Carl ordered their tanks brought up along the gully and sent off the flanking troops. He took Mike aside to instruct him to silently take the camp with his Rangers. The troop leader nodded his understanding and signaled his men to follow him on foot, leaving their mounts to members of Nine Troop, who would bring them up.

“Well, here is the first place things could go in the toilet,” Zach muttered.

The two returned to their observation post atop the hill and watched as the Rangers infiltrated the camp. They crept up the hill behind the unsuspecting invaders. With a quick dash, the guards and dogs were quickly dispatched and Rangers snatched up the enemy helmets and rifles and took their places.

Carl called down to the remaining troops and they began filing around the hill and drifting through the taken camp. When the artillery and the tanks began to set up on the next hill, Mike waved the troops on. The Rangers reclaimed their mounts and dug out grenades from their saddlebags.

At the first explosions from the artillery, the Jefferson troops moved forward under cover of the noise. They set off at a canter waiting for the artillerists to notice them. The troops were able to reach the bottom of the rise undetected, when a loader dropped a shell and saw them out of the corner of his eye as he bent to pick it up. The man froze, for a second, in disbelief. Then he straightened and tugged at an officer's sleeve and pointed down the hill.

By the time he had gained the attention of the officer, the troops had quickened their pace and were almost at the crest. As Nine Troop burst among the gunners, cutting them down to a man, Third Rangers and Fifteen Troop had converged on their respective targets and were clambering on the machines.

The first tank in line fired off a high explosive round and several of the attackers were thrown from the tank by the concussion. The remaining trooper pulled open the hatch and dropped two tear gas canisters into the opening. Immediately, shouts were heard and the smoke poured out of every opening. The rest of the tanks had their hatches open and the troopers assigned to them dropped their canisters in and leapt to the ground.

As the tankers began to stumble out of their vehicles, they were thrown to the ground and bound with plastic binders. One of the gunners stayed in his position and blindly shot his machine gun until a trooper fired through the view slit with his 9mm and killed the man.

Zach immediately had Nine Troop lower the artillery and begin sending shells into the Aztec lines. He signaled to Carl to send the Five and Six Troop Tanks forward. The enemy milled in confusion and Zach tried to identify officers and had his snipers ready, but the dust and smoke obscured most of the opposing force.

As the tanks arrived, Owen Whistler and Wade Hogg leapt from their tank and scrambled into two of the Aztec tanks, while Andy Scales, Willy Sutton and Everett Pasqualli did the same for the remaining tank. Two members of the attacking cavalry troops clambered into the machines after them to take a quick training course in loading and firing the tanks' guns.

With their own artillery and tanks firing at them and the Dannites pouring fire from their front, the Aztec's quickly lost cohesion and scattered to the flanks. They tangled with their cavalry, which was trying to mount a charge on the tank position and broke its coordination. At this point, Two, Four, Eleven and the support Troops charged and destroyed any hope of salvaging the assault.

The Aztec troops began throwing down their weapons and surrendering. Some elements of the cavalry managed to spur away from the battlefield and were followed for a short distance. It was a complete rout of the Aztecs and a resounding victory for the Mormons and their allies.

When the attack began to dissolve into chaos, Carl had grabbed a dozen troopers and ordered them to ride back to the camp and make sure that the enemy cavalry didn't return. He continued to grab troopers and send them back until most of the men from the hill were gone.

He banged on the turrets of Ron and Buck's tanks and sent them back, when he finally got their attention.

Zach met the commander of the Dannites, a huge man with an iron gray, spade shaped beard and a forbidding look. They shook hands and his men continued to disarm and herd the confused and disheartened soldiers. As they were about to shake hands and speak, they heard an explosion to the North.

Everyone on the field looked up and saw falling pieces of the plane. Zach looked around and saw Carl with a rocket launcher in his hand and a smile on his face. He waved and the troopers and Dannites cheered his shot.

Finally, Zach turned back to the Dannite and said, "I'm Zach Banducci."

"I'm Elder William Smith, and welcome. You certainly arrived in the nick of time."

"Happy to help, Elder Smith, happy to help."

Several hundred of the invaders had been killed in the battle and most of the three hundred cavalry had escaped, but the remaining twelve hundred prisoners were secured, along with the commander and his staff.

That evening, the Aztec commander, Jesus Morales, was entertained in his tent by Elder Smith, his second in command, Paul Westfall, Zach and Carl. His men were fed from their own supply wagons, closely guarded by the Dannites. The tent was roughly equipped with Spartan furnishings and a minimum of luxury, demonstrating that this was a fighting man and not a court fop.

"I was sure we had managed to get to this place without you gentlemen from Jefferson detecting us," he said, raising his wine served in tin camp mugs.

“Well, you are an unpleasant surprise, to us, General,” returned Zach. “We are used to dealing with political appointees and fools, not competent officers.”

Carl added, “Your disposition of forces was superb. Without our help, the Dannites were in a precarious position.” He didn’t add that a screening force, especially with his numerical superiority, would have foiled the Jefferson attack and assured him of victory.

“What do you propose doing with myself and my men, if I may ask, gentlemen?”

Elder Smith looked at his companion and cleared his throat. “Well, we can’t feed you, nor keep you. We have no prisoner camps.

“What would our allies suggest?” he asked, turning to Zach and Carl.

“Whoa. We can’t take them, if that is what you are implying. Unless you want to shoot them, I would suggest we give them enough supplies to get them back to Aztecland or wherever. I would assume that the cavalry has stopped running and have regrouped. We can’t keep you here and the Mormons don’t want you. So, tomorrow, I would suggest that you take your army, such supplies as you will need and take off. Your cavalry will, undoubtedly, meet you somewhere to the South and escort you back to your borders.

“If that meets with your approval, Elder Smith, Elder Westfall.”

“I see no other way. We would not approve of the wholesale slaughter of helpless prisoners.”

The next morning, the Aztecs were lined up and marched away after burying their dead. They took half of the supplies with them and were escorted, at a distance, by two troops of Dannites.

Miraculously, no Jefferson troopers suffered more than superficial wounds. The Dannite casualties were also light, since the guns had only fired a dozen or so shots, most of those ranging shots, before they were taken.

Elder Smith made a half-hearted bid for all of the captured equipment, but Zach and Carl offered him two of the tanks and one of the artillery pieces and half of the captured small arms and ammunition.

Later that morning, after the invaders had been sent off, a mob of horsemen rode in. The leader was a stout, little man with a bristling mustache and a thick pair of glasses. He bounced out of the saddle and thrust out a hand. "Colonel James Macklin's the name. Looks like we got here too late. We're Bear Flaggers." He called for his men to dismount and turned back. "We met some of your runners yesterday and gave them an extra whipping. Got close to forty horses. Took a few casualties. Sent them back with the booty, not the runners, the wounded."

The grinning man took Zach and the rest aback. He spoke as if they were half deaf, his words roaring out. They introduced themselves and related the tale of the battle. James rubbed his hands and grinned broadly as the story unfolded.

"Great, just great," he said, when Zach had finished. "Sorry we missed it. We'll have breakfast and be on our way. We still have a little rumbling in the South. These Aztecs don't know when they are licked."

He and his men took over the breakfast fires and soon had flapjacks and biscuits cooking. The men mingled and got to know each other. Their officers met in the General's old tent to discuss the Aztec situation.

"My, what a fine field tent," said Macklin, looking around.

“We find it more military than the other Aztec commanders used. They had rugs, fine furniture, wine, silver, china, all that kind of stuff. All General Morales brought was a couple cases of wine and tequila. You are welcome to share, Colonel,” invited Carl. “The Mormon gentlemen have no use for the stuff.”

“Oh, we have some of the finest wines available,” returned the Colonel, “but I will take a bottle or two of the tequila, if you really don’t mind.”

They parted company after the division of spoils. The Mormons took a brief driving lesson from Buck and hooked up the artillery piece and left.

Jim Macklin was happy with a case of tequila and invited them to call on them any time they needed help.

The Jefferson contingent, with the rest of the booty, turned their faces east towards home. On the second day they met a party of Sioux. They had come down to help, also, and were disappointed that the fight was over. Zach toyed with the idea of letting them know where the defeated invaders were, but decided against it. The Aztecs were nearly defenseless and he really admired General Morales.

Carl offered a hundred rifles and ammunition as a token of appreciation of their effort to help and the two contingents parted.

They arrived back at the Front Door to much the same crowd as had seen them off at the Back Door. After they reported to the Council, they scattered to their homes.

Chapter 2

Reaver Attack

Spring 2045

That was relatively painless. One broken leg and a few minor scratches. We got three tanks, over five hundred arms and ammunition, an artillery piece and assorted light machine guns. Oh, three cases of tequila and six cases of wine that is any good. The four barrels that were for the rankers was pretty close to vinegar.

The only thing that troubled me was the improvement in the generalship. Morales only made two mistakes that I saw. He didn't leave a trustworthy officer in charge of the camp guard to keep them alert and he didn't put out a screen of pickets. Either of these and we wouldn't have been able to mount an attack on the guns and would have, either, to destroy their tanks and guns with our tanks, which was not a sure thing, by any means; or to wait for the battle to finish and attack in the aftermath.

Well, as things turned out, we got equipment, humiliated the Aztecs and reinforced our friendship with our allies.

Now, I have a case to hear as JP and a cattle drive to organize.

Since the cattle along the river to the west of Jefferson had pretty well picked over, Zach decided to send a crew out to the east, along the Platte. The river didn't provide as much cover for the cattle and it would take a lot more work to collect the three to five hundred head he was hoping for. He would be happier when their herds were self-sustaining, though that would take a few more years and the opening of more territory.

He sent Matt out with a crew of seven. He was leery of Charlie Gonzalez taking his wife, Ramona, along, but they were newlyweds and in love. Anyway, as Matt pointed out, she was a much better cook than any of the rest of them. To do the heavy lifting and tending the fires, there would be Jiggs Hanson, the kid with Downs Syndrome. Ramona could handle him well enough, where the rest of the crew got him mad and stubborn.

They set out with a chuck wagon and a remuda of extra horses. The rest of the crew was made up of Peter O'Malley and Don Williams, from his Troop and Michael O'Callaghan and Jaimie Costler, who needed some government script because they had to redeem some of their own from the General Store.

"No more than two weeks, Matt," Zach ordered. "It doesn't matter how many head you have, bring them in by then." He waved them off and turned back to his office in the Courthouse.

"Speaking of script," he muttered to himself. There was a case waiting for him, brought by the Council. It seems that Ed Finkle had overdrawn his script again, for the third time since he arrived from the Fundamentalists' lands. Zach wondered if he would be more sympathetic if he and his wife weren't so distasteful.

He entered his office to find Charlie, representing the Commissary. The Finkle's were sitting in the first row and Ed jumped to his feet and began pleading his case immediately, mouthing excuses and platitudes.

"Quiet, Ed," Zach said wearily. "Let me, at least, sit down and bring the court to order."

"Sure, sure, judge," replied Ed, nodding and grinning and following him to his seat.

"ED!" snapped Zach. "Sit down!"

Ed looked around as if to discover how he had gotten there and scurried back to his chair.

“Charlie, what’s the story from your side?”

“Zach, once again, Ed and Amanda are overdrawn. I have been giving them enough food to survive on...”

“It isn’t fit for the pigs out back, judge,” said Ed, jumping to his feet and pointing at the back of the building. “All we want is decent food. And medicine for Amanda, here.”

“Ed,” interjected Zach, trying to stop the flow from the defendant. “Ed! ED! Sit DOWN. You’ll get your say when Charlie is done. No more interruptions. Go on, Charlie.”

“Anyway, I have been giving them enough food to survive on and offering him and Amanda work to pay off their script, but they never show up. He has a thousand excuses for everything. The boys have been paying for him, and now, they are overdrawn, too.

“This is the third time this has happened, Zach.”

Wearily, Zach looked at Ed and called on him to speak.

“Now, I like Charlie and all, but he hasn’t come anywhere near the truth. The food he gives us isn’t fit for human consumption. We can’t, barely, get it down. And I show up for work, but it’s nothing I’m trained for, though I try. Lord knows I try.

“If I could just have some more time, maybe, get a loan or something.”

“Ed, you and I both know that you have borrowed from everyone that would lend to you. No one will hire you because you don’t work. The only reason you get anything, is that we don’t let people, who are part of the community, starve.”

Zach continued after a deep breath. “You have a long record of giving excuses and getting ‘hurt’ on the job and expecting everyone else to bail you out. Your sons, out of filial pity, have done their jobs and worked for you and loaned you to the hilt. You really are a disgrace, you know.”

“Amanda, you have refused to work at all, saying your arthritis was acting up, or your back hurt or another of a hundred excuses. You have not done a constructive thing since you joined us, last year. If Jimmy and Dooby weren’t such a value to the community, you would have been banished long ago.

“This country carried people like you for nearly a hundred years, since the Great Society of Johnson. You sponged off your fellows and called for more. It got so bad that there were enough of you to be a large voting block which the parties bought with programs, like the ancient Romans with their ‘Bread and Circuses’.

“Well, this new world has no place for you. Go back to the Fundys or try the west coast. Maybe they will take your guff, but we are tired of it.

“You know the rules, and we have bent over backward giving you chances, but no more. You have two weeks to pay down your debt to the store. A job will be provided for you and you will complete it to the satisfaction of this court. If not, I will recommend that you be given food, weapons, tools and animals and be banished forever.”

Amanda began to wail and cry. Ed stood there with his mouth open like a landed fish. Their sons shuffled their feet and looked embarrassed.

“You can’t mean that, judge,” wailed Ed. “How will me and Amanda and the boys live? You can’t throw us out into the cold! That’s, that’s ... heartless.”

“Ed, the decision is final. But it does not apply to the boys. They will always be welcome here. This order would be for you and Amanda, because you two are the ones who can’t follow the rules of this community.

“Charlie, find a job for the two of them. They can’t use surrogates, like their sons or others. Write me up a detailed list of the job and what you expect would be the finishing of it. Report back to me in two weeks or, if they get it done sooner, then.

He slammed his gavel onto the desk and declared, “Court closed.”

After the hearing, he walked across the square to the Commissary with Charlie. They discussed the job for Ed and Amanda and the state of the community in general.

“Three more families came in yesterday. They came from down south on the eastside. They say there had been a community trying to make a go of it in Palo Duro canyon. Remember where those bodies were found?

“Said it was getting hard, what with Aztec patrols and the winters. They decided to come in. They settled down at Falls Canyon. John Fallon is a farmer, he has two small children. Wife died in childbirth.

“Another is a guy named Wendall Freeman. Said he escaped from the Fundies and he and his wife and two children, along with a couple of teen-agers. They met up with Fallon and joined him.

“The other group is a strange bunch. They used a couple of names. The dad calls himself Meir, Jacob Meir. Then Sandy asked the youngest her name and was told it was Mary White. I think that they are Jews who have been living with the Fundies and hiding it. I would like you to talk with them, when you get a chance, if you don’t mind.”

Zach agreed, picked up a few things, turned in some script from the butchers, Boris Bronski and Rafael Torres, which they had paid for a dozen cows. He undercut the price from the common herd by a few hours when he had culls to sell.

He went over to Doc White's to speak with him about sending someone out to check on William, who had a cough. Doc had a dozen 'interns' in training. One of the standing orders was the salvage of anything in the way of medical supplies, prescriptions and books that were found. Even old prescriptions were better than nothing. The town had built him a sturdy building to house his supplies. Between him and Doc Allen, the nurses and the chemist, they had a pretty good grasp on the health of the communities and always had a class for midwives and medics going.

Zach was finishing up in town and was bringing the wagon around to the house where the 'three sisters' lived. Coralee Morris, Janet Smith and Tammy Niles had a small house near the south edge of town they shared with Hans Minkema and Harry McGregor. The five of them made a family unit. There was some talk about marriage, but nothing had come of it, yet. That was probably a good thing, since there were still some rumblings about bigamy and Zach was concerned about introducing group marriages.

As he stopped before the door, Sarah came out carrying the twins. The two older children were staying with the Smolleks. They were sent on their way with a chorus of good-byes and reached the ranch in time for dinner.

Two days later, while mending fence with Leslie Smollek, George Esperanza, of Four Troop galloped up.

"You better come to town, Zach. There's a problem. Matt rode in. Jaimie is hurt bad and the Council has been called. Your phone line is down, again, too."

Zach didn't wait to ask useless question, but sprinted for the barn to saddle a horse while George walked his mount to cool it off and told Leslie what he knew, which was little enough. A few minutes later, Zach rode to the house to get his weapons and joined the other two men.

“Let’s go, George. Sorry, Leslie, you’re going to have to finish the fence yourself. I’ll let you know as soon as I know anything,” Zach called over his shoulder as he and George rode away.

When they reached Doc’s hospital, a small crowd had gathered. Zach shouldered through the press and asked Matt how Jamie was and what had happened.

“No good news either way for Jamie, but Charlie is going to be okay,” Matt replied. “The Council wants us as soon as possible; I’ll fill you in on the way.”

They strode across the square to the City Hall and entered the Council Chambers trailed by half the town. William Smith, the governor, asked those not part of the council to clear the room.

“We’ll let you all know what is what as soon as we know,” he said, his black moon of a face shiny with sweat. He had come from the Commissary where he was helping to unload scavenged goods that Four Troop had brought in.

The rest of the Council had obviously been called away from their normal duties for the emergency meeting.

“Matt, want to fill us in on what happened? So far, what we know, is that you were hit by someone while you were gathering cattle for Zach,” William asked.

“Yeah, we were down on the Platte, pretty spread out, south of the camp. We got there the evening before and started early. Ramona and Jiggs were with the wagon. About mid-morning, I heard faint shots. I was with Charlie Gonzalez. Don, Mike and Jamie were on the other side of the river, the side the wagon was on.

“We rode towards the camp with the others ahead of us. They were hit with an ambush and Jamie went down, hard. Charlie was hit, too. I saw him sag in the saddle. Mike let loose with that pump shotgun he carries and we were able to get Jamie out of there.

“A dozen riders came out of a draw in our right and we headed back to the river and used the bank as cover. We got them in a crossfire and cut down four or five of them. The rest backed off and pinned us down. After an hour or so, there was a noise, like a horn or something. The riders headed off east and we rode for the wagon.

“When we got there we found it looted and Jiggs was dead. They, they mutilated him. Tied him to a wagon wheel and cut him up, bad. It was pretty awful. There was no sign of Ramona.

“Don and I got Jamie and Charlie into the wagon and came back as fast as we could travel. Mike took supplies and water and set out to track them down.”

Zach, who had gotten the condensed version on the walk over, asked, “Mahdists?”

“No, not Mahdists. Not Sioux, either. I would bet they were reavers. The look I got at the ones we killed was hurried, but they didn’t have any of the Mahdists trappings and they didn’t look like Sioux. One of them was a blonde with dirty whiskers.”

“And there were how many?” asked Simon Pelligrino.

“At least twenty, from the tracks and what we saw riding away. There didn’t look like there were any women with them. The bands we usually tangle with are in one bunch. These bastards probably had a camp set up somewhere, which means a big enough mob to protect what they left behind. Kind of like that gang we nailed in Rawlings, if you know what I mean.”

“That bunch had thirty or more,” Zach mused. “They raided in bunches of eight to ten at a time. We were lucky enough to get them coming back from a big raid, all together. I would

guess that with a raiding party of twenty, that the gang either has twenty-five, plus women, if this was a big raid, which I doubt; or sixty, plus women, if this raid was a small band.

“Either way, we are going to need four or five full troops.”

There was a murmur from the Council members.

“Ed, what do we have at hand?” Zach asked.

Ed doodled on a piece of paper while he thought. “There are the usual two Troops here on guard, with another in training. Most of One Troop is here, on leave for two weeks. Four Troop just returned from patrol. We could do what we did last month against the Aztecs, have the auxiliaries and militia take over guard duty, bring up one troop from the valleys to reinforce them.

“I wouldn’t want to take Five and Six Troops. We don’t know what kind of terrain there is and the tanks might be more of a hindrance than not. Oh, and I think Fourth Rangers are nearby, maybe, at Black Valley. I’ll check when I phone, if the lines are up.”

William asked Ed to contact the valleys and ordered the outlying ranches and farms to pull their people into the settlements or Mitchell. The Council scattered. Zach ran to the hotel/billet to see who was there. He rang the assembly bell in the lobby and was soon surrounded by troopers of the First and Fourth. He quickly explained the situation and sent off runners to rouse the rest of their troops and supply for a two-week campaign.

After leaving the hotel, he headed for the War Room and got maps of the region of the Platte and the panhandle of Nebraska. He found the operator on duty had sent the messages and Seven Troop was mustering to Mitchell, while Nine Troop took over the patrol of Beaver Valley.

He clapped the man on the shoulder and ran to his horse and galloped to his ranch. Leslie had finished the fence and was washing up when Zach pounded into the yard and leapt from his

horse before it had slid to a stop. He was drying his hands when Zach took the porch stairs at a leap and followed him into his side of the Texas house.

He explained to the three adults and in a half hour they had gathered up clothes, weapons and children, loaded up a wagon and were driving for town. As they rode, he gave a more complete picture of what was happening. Sarah was exasperated at his apparent enthusiasm.

“I don’t suppose you can find someone else to go on this rescue mission,” she noted acerbically. “Zach, you are old enough to stay at home. You, yourself, keep saying that the older men are needed at home to pass on knowledge and it is selfish of them to put themselves in needless danger.”

“Oh, Sarah,” he replied, “you know that I don’t have a skill worth passing on. And, there are only three skilled sharpshooters. They may need my talents, few that they are.

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll be okay,” he finished as he spurred down the road, M-1 in hand and his sniper rifle in a scabbard under his right leg. He and Sarah had this same argument every time he went off and he felt guilty because he knew she was right.

When he got into town, the five troops were ready at the Front Door. Carl informed him that Four Rangers were going to meet them near the meeting place of the Sioux, tomorrow. Three riders from One Troop had ridden ahead as point.

The Troops galloped out, each man with a spare mount and supplies for two weeks. Carl led One, Four and Eleven Troops, while Zach took over Thirteen and Fourteen Troops.

When they reached the agreed upon location, they didn’t find Four Rangers, but a party of Sioux and several wagons of strangers waiting. The leader of the Sioux, Lame Horse, greeted his old friends with enthusiasm.

“Well met, guys,” he said. “Glad you showed up. I was about to send this bunch of pilgrims in your direction. We found them wandering around near Miles City. Came out of Canada. They are a strange bunch, come on and meet them.”

He turned his horse and they approached the wagons. Sitting on the seat of the first one, his back straight as a ramrod and wearing a grey-streaked beard and a turban was a dark complected man wearing a curved sword.

There were several younger versions of the man sitting horses nearby.

“I thought you usually killed Mahdists, Lane Horse,” Zach said. “What did you bring them here for?”

“Well, white man, these are not Mahdists. They’re Sikhs. Very warlike, very tough. You can tell by the turbans. You should get out more, Zach, become world-wise like me and you would know these things.”

“Yeah, right. You were never far from your mother’s skirts in your life. What, did you find out who and what they were yesterday?” Zach scoffed.

“I am deeply offended at your inference that I am just an ignorant savage. I found out about Sikhs four days ago,” Lane Horse laughed.

“They didn’t look like the usual Mahdists and we asked before we slaughtered them. They don’t like Muslims any more than we do. We told them about the rules around here and they wanted to meet you,” he continued.

“May I introduce you to Ishar Singh, the leader of this merry, little band.” He bowed to the older man as the three stopped beside his wagon.

They shook hands and exchanged greetings. Carl explained the situation, quickly, to them. He asked Lane Horse to provide a guide for the party to Mitchell.

“Wait,” ordered Ishar Singh. He turned to the men around the wagon and spoke to them in a booming voice, using a strange language. They sounded to Zach like commands and the men exploded into action. He called over his shoulder and a rifle and pack was passed to him. A rider brought up a horse and he leapt to its back as a dozen riders assembled nearby.

He singled out two of the young men and gave them orders they didn’t like. He cut off their arguments with a slash of his hand and turned to the surprised Zach, Carl and Lame Horse.

“We are ready to go. Under whose command will we be?” he bellowed.

“Ready for what?” asked Zach.

“To join your expedition, of course. Why are we delaying? Should we not be going?”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Slow down,” Zach sputtered. “Why are you doing this?”

“Two reasons. One, it is our religion. Two, if we are to be a part of your community, we will assume the duties.”

Zach turned to a laughing Lame Horse as if to ask what was going on.

Lame Horse grinned, “Told you they were odd. As a matter of fact, though, why don’t you take us along, too? We know the territory and have been hit by these bastards ourselves.”

“And leave these wagons here, I suppose. Let a party of reavers find them and do what? Mr. Singh, thanks for the offer, but without Lame Horse’s men or your own, this train would be defenseless.”

“I am leaving Ishar Singh and Uttar Singh with the wagons. The older boys can drive. But, maybe you are right.” He broke off and addressed another of his men. The look on his face was greeted with, what sounded like, ribbing from the rest.

“There,” the grey bearded man said to Zach. “I have ordered another of my men to stay with the wagons.”

Chapter 3

Revenge

Spring 2045

I don't really know how this happened. We have a bunch of Sikhs, whatever they are, volunteering to go off and fight reavers. I have a feeling that if I had tried to forbid this Ishar Singh from trailing along, I would have been ignored. They look like fighters, though, so 'welcome aboard'.

Zach was flabbergasted, but before he had a chance to say anything, Four Rangers appeared over the hill and reported that the reavers had headed for the panhandle of Nebraska. Paolo Fuentes, the leader of the rangers, gave a curious look at the Sikhs and said, "Who are these Sikhs, Zach?"

"Does everyone know what a Sikh is but me, now? Recruits, Paolo, recruits. They want to join the party.

"Well, I don't have time to stand around and argue. Lame Horse, ride with Carl and, you, Mr. Singh, ride with me. Carl is in military charge, so take your orders from him. Paolo, send your rangers out and find me Mike, if you can."

As the enhanced party rode out of the vale, the wagons headed southwest towards Mitchell. Carl had ordered one of the younger troopers as a guide.

The rangers spread out as flankers and point and the troops headed for the Platte where the attack had taken place. They arrived and buried the remains of Jiggs. He was a pain sometimes because of his eagerness to help, but his cheerful demeanor and childlike innocence would be missed. After sending the night, they moved out before dawn the next morning.

The expedition set a fast pace and, changing horses, followed the markers left by the rangers spread out before them. They encountered Bill Williamson sitting on a fallen cottonwood tree, in the early afternoon. He reported that the tracks headed sharply southeast.

Two days later they found a group of rangers surrounding Mike O'Callaghan. They had a small, smokeless fire going and were heating water for willow bark tea. Mike was in sad shape. He had lost his food in a crossing the Platte and hadn't eaten for several days, except for some young berries and wild onions.

He had news, however. The reavers were holed up in Peetz, a small town on the Colorado-Nebraska border. The gang had taken over the town and had turned it into an armed camp.

"There are near a hundred of them, though there aren't that many at any one time. I spotted them nearly a week ago and they send out a foraging party each day in a different direction. The foraging party numbers near twenty men, but there seems to be something else going on. There are storage silos on the edge of town and I managed to get into one of them and climbed to the top. I saw sort of an auction going on.

"From what I could see, the buyers were Mahdists. I don't know what they paid with, but they were bidding on women and girls and young boys. They are kept in a brick building on the main street.

"It was all kind of confusing. I'm sorry, Carl."

Carl patted him on the shoulder, "Don't worry about it, Mike. Can you draw me a map of the place? Do you have any idea where the next raiding party is heading for or where it went?"

Mike nodded at the first question and took a stick and drew in a smoothed over place in the dirt. “There is a railroad track running just east of the main town. There is a road, here, that crosses the tracks and is the main road through town. Here are the silos and there are a few buildings farther east, beyond highway 113, I think it is.

“Now, here is the town, this building is where the, I guess, slaves are. The reavers and Mahdists are scattered all around these brick buildings. Now, the last few foragers went to the south, southeast, east and northeast.”

Carl scratched his bristly cheek and thought aloud, “They’re swinging around the compass. The next group should have gone north and the next one would be heading in our direction. This sales thing worries me. I don’t want to see those women and children sold into slavery, which I agree with Mike, is what is going on.

“Paolo, I want your rangers to sit on the road east, oh, about ten miles out, which the Mahdist would naturally use to get back to New Mecca. Take half of Thirteen Troop with you. If they come your way, and there are enough of you to stop them, do it. But, don’t bite off more than you can chew. Now get out of here.”

Paolo left to speak with John Wolfe. A few minutes later Mike Massoglia and his half troop followed the rangers out of camp.

Meanwhile, Carl asked, “Lame Horse, do any of your boys have bows?”

“About half. And they are good with them,” he said with a grin, getting the drift of Carl’s question.

“All right,” he proposed. “Zach, take Lame Horse and his men, along with the rest of the Thirteenth, head northeast and try to cut off the reaver foraging party and cut down the odds. If we can eliminate a fifth of their strength and wait for the Mahdists to leave, maybe we will have

a chance. Hopefully, we can take the first foraging party and they send out another one before they get suspicious.”

“Question, Mr. Singh?”

“Yes, colonel. Where are we to fight?”

“Go with Zach, but remember, he is in charge. Anything else?”

“No, colonel,” he replied and barked commands to his men.

Zach walked up to Carl and said in a low voice, “Carl, why them?”

“They are getting restless and they have toad stickers. I need you and the bowmen to take out a few and we will let the Sikhs cut down the rest. I want it quiet and thorough. No warning the town, you know?”

Zach nodded and called for the Sikhs, the Sioux and John Wolf to join him. They rode away; leaving Carl organizing the remaining troops into defensive positions in case Zach or the rangers had to beat a hasty retreat.

The Sioux galloped off to act as scouts and Zach and the rest followed. They hit the north/south road and began looking for a spot to ambush the reavers. There wasn’t a good spot until a group of trees flanked the eastern side of the road and Sioux and Zach set up among the trees. The Sikhs hid in a gully on the other side of the road.

The plan was to surprise the reavers and drive them into the arms of the Sikhs, who would dispatch the survivors with their swords, though Zach was sure that they were far enough from Peetz not to worry about the noise of shots. Three of the Sioux spread out to the north to plug for the trap.

They settled down to wait. Most of the men lay down to nap, rotating watches for the next few hours. By the time the troops were getting restless, a rider showed on the road from the

north. Word went down the line and sleepers were roused. The men took their places, the bowmen and Zach spread evenly along the tree line.

More of the reavers showed on the crest as the leaders dropped down, following the road. The last of the raiders, leading packhorses, crested the rise as the leaders came back into view. By the time the head of the column reached the killing zone, all of the reavers were in sight.

Zach, who had cleaned his shells and found a comfortable shooting position, trained his weapon on the last rider and squeezed off a shot. The bullet took the man in the center of his forehead, snapping his head back and tumbling him over the rear of his mount. The packhorses started, but continued to follow the column, which was still unaware of their danger.

Another shot brought down the man who was now in the last position. His horse bolted when its rider dropped. A moment of confusion allowed for a third shot and a third kill. The four bowmen let fly and three more of the reavers fell.

Several of the reavers fired wildly into the trees, the bullets going high, as two more of their number were hit. An aborted charge at the trees saw four more reavers go down and the rest broke for the other side of the road. Most were looking back over their shoulders and didn't see the Sihks, waving swords, charge out of the gulley. They met them head on and cut left and right.

None of the reavers escaped from the onslaught and the fight was over in a few seconds. Thirteen Troop rounded up the loose horses and corralled them away from the smell of blood. They found two of the reavers wounded but, under questioning, they refused to talk. Ishar Singh offered to cut their throats and Zach left him to it.

An inspection of the packs found canned goods, weapons, ammunition, clothes and various articles made of silver and gold.

“Looks like they hit a jewelry store,” said Ishar Singh, holding up several gunny sacks containing earrings, bracelets and necklaces. “They didn’t even take them out of their boxes.

The bodies were dragged off the road and left for the coyotes and wolves and crows. The men mounted and headed back to the main encampment. The Sioux, again, took scout positions around the main body.

When they arrived, Carl nodded his approval of their actions. He said there was a report of the Mahdists preparing to leave and that another band of reavers was heading in their direction.

“They are too predictable to be successful,” Carl opined. “They should be in our laps in about three hours. I figure that we can take this bunch and that will leave about sixty or so. By the time they get here, the Mahdist caravan should be out of earshot, but I want some scouts out in that direction.

“Lame Horse, can you send your boys out to form a picket line around us?”

“Zach, I am counting on you to take several of Thirteen Troop and form a decoy. Get out there and sting them with a couple of shots and draw them into the killing ground. When they get close, the Sikhs can sweep around and block their retreat.

“One or two good volleys should wipe them out.”

Zach asked John Wolf to detail three of his men to form the decoy and rode out towards Peetz. They didn’t go far before they almost ran into the raiding party coming out of a draw. Zach’s group let off a hasty volley into the ranks of the surprised enemy and reversed themselves out of there at a gallop.

The reavers regained control of their mounts and fired a ragged volley of their own, dropping Jock Paine. Zach couldn’t stop to see how badly he was hurt, but galloped off, drawing

his .38 and shooting over his shoulder. He didn't expect to hit anything, but hoped that the reavers wouldn't stop.

Their horses were flagging when they rode through the ambush area and, at the first shots, halted their mounts and dismounted, forming a short skirmish line to stop anyone from escaping in their direction.

It proved unnecessary. The volleys from the hidden marksmen cut down the reavers to a man. While Carl oversaw the collecting of the horses and anything worth salvaging, Zach took a party to collect Jock. They found him sprawled where they had left him. Wallace Chevski, their medic, checked the body and announced that the shot that took him out had killed him instantly.

They gathered up the body and escorted it back to their camp and buried him. The arrival of the rangers and a train of wagons carrying Ramona and captive women and children interrupted the short ceremony. The greetings were muted by the three blanket covered bodies unloaded from the first wagon. Two rangers and a trooper had paid the ultimate price for the rescue mission. Harry Sims, George Peck and Charles Mahoney were laid to rest beside Jacob to the soft sobbing of the women.

They had killed all but one of the Mahdists. The captive was one of the merchants. The short, fat man with a neatly clipped goatee was pale and drenched in nervous sweat. Zach ordered his too tight bonds to be loosened and water brought. He smiled as he gave the man the canteen.

The merchant smiled obsequiously and upended the canteen, draining it. He was reassured by Zach's smile and demeanor and began babbling immediately, "Good sir, I beg of you, let me go. I am Mustafa Simpson and I have done nothing."

“Nothing? What about the women and children? What were you doing with them?”

Zach asked quietly.

The man glanced over at the fire where the women and children were being fed and replied, “Those are the wives and families of myself and the other merchants. Your men viciously attacked us, a peaceful party of traders. The killed the guards and my brother merchants and took the rest of us captive. We were so afraid that we would all be killed.

“The women and children have been told to tell the outrageous story that they were slaves. That way, they might be spared the indignity of, of... well, you know what I mean.”

Zach seemed to think this over and, finally, observed, “But I thought that Muslim women wore those long, covering robes. These women had hardly anything on, at all.”

“When we were attacked, they quickly threw off their burqas, kind sir. That is why they were unseemly uncovered. That is the truth.”

“But my man saw them in Peetz on an auction block,” rejoined Zach, pointing at Mike who nodded and held up his binoculars.

The merchant blanched and stared at Zach, who stood and looked down at him with a small smile on his face. “Now that that is cleared up, shall we get to the truth? What were you doing in Peetz?

“I should tell you, that there are things we know and if you lie to me, I will take you to the nearest tree and slowly hang you.”

Two fat tears rolled down his full cheeks and the man blubbered incoherently for a few minutes with his eyes squeezed shut. Finally, Zach grew tired of the show and nudged the man with the toe of his boot.

The merchant let out a shriek, as if Zach had kicked him with all of his strength. He fell over and rolled on the ground and soiled himself.

Ishar Singh strolled up to see what was happening. “He is disturbing the ladies lunch, Zach. Why don’t we just cut his throat and be done with it?” He drew his Kirpan and stood over the trader, idly swinging it.

Mustafa crawled behind Zach, staring at the Sikh with wide-open eyes.

“Ishar, if he doesn’t answer me, you can have him as my gift to do with what you will.”

“No, no, I will answer you. What do you want to know?” the merchant hastily said in a high, cracking voice.

Zach repeated his questions and Mustafa answered that the reavers sold captives to the merchants of New Mecca. Recently, they had moved their base of operations to Peetz. The old territory had been picked clean.

They would usually send a messenger to New Mecca informing the merchants where the new slave market was and what items were needed in trade. A caravan would arrive on the allotted days and trade goods for captives.

The slaves would be taken back to New Mecca, where they would be sold at the market place as slaves or concubines to rich Muslims or inducted into the army. At times the reavers would stay in a rich area for several sales and sometimes they would move on after one.

He told them that the reavers would raid into Sioux lands or among the Fundamentalists, but left Jefferson alone. They were afraid of their unforgiving attitude and military organization.

When Zach informed him that they were from Jefferson and that one of their hunting parties had been attacked, a man killed and a woman abducted, Mustafa blanched and began praying, sure that his life was forfeit.

“Enough of that,” Zach said, tired of the man. “How many men are in the town? How many raiding parties are out at any one time? Are there any guards? How alert are they?”

“There are around a hundred men and twenty or twenty-five ‘wives’. There are two or three raiding parties out at a time, I think. Twenty men each. They are gone for two, three days at a time. Guards? Guards. There is a water tower; it has a man on the walkway. I think they are very serious about guards. At another town the Baron, that’s what he is called, Baron. I don’t know if that is his name or what. A title, maybe.

“Anyway, Baron had a man shot for sleeping on guard. He got everyone together and shot him, himself. Oh, yes, guards. There are men at the roads leading into town. Two or three men.

“After a sale, though, there is a big celebration. A lot of the men are drunk. We sell them liquor and drugs.”

When he was finished, he looked around eagerly. He had gotten to his knees during his rapid-fire answer and appeared like a begging dog.

Zach looked at Ishar and shrugged.

“He answered your questions, he should go free. IF. If he is telling the truth,” said the large man. “I think we should take him with us and, if he has lied, give a slow, painful death.” He finished with an evil grin that almost sent the Muslim into a state of catatonic fear.

Zach ordered a trooper to watch the man and walked away with the Sikh grinning. “You could scare a grizzly with that look, you know.”

With a quiet smile, Ishar said, “So the children tell me.”

Carl called a council of war later that day and, when Zach, Lame Deer, Ishar Singh and the squad leaders had assembled, said, “From what Zach reports, there are still sixty to seventy

reavers left. We started out with a hundred and forty-five men. Twenty-five from the Sikhs and ten from the Sioux. We sent four back with the wagons hauling Ishar's people, we lost four dead and four wounded in the fight with the Mahdists.

"That leave us with one hundred and thirty-six, though I want to send the women and children back to Mitchell and that will take men away for a guard.

"Let's say, when all is said and done, that we have one hundred and twenty-five. That is, if Ishar and Lame Horse stick with us. This isn't their fight and they don't have any obligation for this."

Both men indicated that they would stay and Carl continued, "Thanks. So, we outnumber them by almost two-to-one. They usually have a close guard, but they may be having a celebration after the trading and won't be as watchful at usual.

"We took out twenty of their men and they don't seem to monitor the raiding parties too closely, so the two parties we took out may not be missed for the next couple of days, but after that, they will know that something is wrong.

"Now, we can wait and watch and see if they send out another party looking for the other two, but I don't like waiting. What we are going to do is send a couple of rangers in close to town and see if there is a celebration, locate the guards and be in place to take those guards out after the partying dies down and they are in a drunken stupor. When that is done, the rest of us sweep in and kill them all."

There were grins from the participants at the simplification of the operation. They all knew that it would not be so easy and that any plan would be out the window with the first contact. They liked Carl's plan because it was detailed at the beginning and general at the end.

Zach spoke up, “Carl, I think we should hit them from several sides at once to maximize the confusion.”

Carl nodded, “I didn’t mean to imply that my plan was complete. There still are some details to work out. I think your idea is a good one, Zach.

“Here’s what I propose. Fourth Rangers take the eastern and southern and water tower sentries. Lame Horse, can you men handle the sentries on the north and west?”

Lame Horse looked askance at the question.

“Zach, I want you to take Four and Eleven Troops and hit the town from the north, along the railroad tracks. I’ll take One and Fourteen Troops from the west, behind the houses and the silos. Ishar, you and your men, with half of Thirteen Troop, hit them from the south. The land is too open from the west to bring a force in. Fourth Rangers and the Sioux will take out the sentries and get to the west side, if they can. All except for the Sioux in the east, they’ll join us in our attack.

“Any questions?”

“What about the other half of Thirteen Troop?” asked John Wolf. “Are they the escort for the wagons?”

“Right. I want them to start out now. Lame Horse, Ishar, get your men ready and escort them until you have to separate and get to your positions for the attack. Let’s load up the wagons with the loot and head out.

“Oh, Lame Horse, I’ll take those of your men who will hit the sentries on the west with me, okay?

“Let’s go, boys, and be careful as you can. If you hear any firing before midnight, head in that direction or bug out and meet back here or find the wagons. I’ll start the ball rolling for the real attack, so get in position and get ready to move.”

They loaded up the wagons with the weapons, tack, supplies and the wounded. When they were finished, the party broke up and set out for their designated stations.

Time seemed to creep by. Around 10:30pm, a ranger approached Zach. It seemed that the sentry in the water tower couldn’t be taken as planned. The building was too open and the sentry was too alert. They needed Zach to take him out with his sniper rifle, if he could.

Turning over the troops to Kim Allen, Zach followed the trooper back to towards town. He left his equipment, taking only his cased weapon. The ranger led him around to the east side of town, where the best vantage point was. The range finder scoped in at two hundred and twenty-one yards, but the shot would be tricky due to the elevation and the small window he had as the sentry paced around the tower.

When the rangers moved off to take care of the guards, Zach counted to a slow one hundred and settled his sights on the distant form. He took a deep breath, let out half, took up the slack on the trigger, slowly squeezed off the shot and chambered another round.

His first shot seemed to freeze the sentry and his second shot dropped him from the tower, his rifle clattering to the road. At the same moment, Carl advanced from the west and there were a scattering of shots, which increased in volume as they closed in on the center of town.

Almost immediately, there were shots from the south and north. In front of him, two or three weapons joined in. He spotted a form on the roof of a building and, figuring that none of

their men would have made it there in the short time the attack had been underway, took a shot. The form dropped and Zach advanced in a crouch, weapon at the ready.

When he reached the first substantial building, he slung his rifle and drew his revolver. He rounded the building and almost traded shots with one of Lamé Horse's men. The Indian grinned at Zach and whispered, "Bang." Zach grinned back and pointed to the sound of gunfire.

They moved off and were joined by two rangers. Together they broke up a knot of defenders who exited a building in front of them. One of the rangers dropped with a bullet in his leg and he waved them on.

The fight had devolved into a confusion of small battles that erupted and broke up in seconds. Several buildings were on fire and Zach wondered how many had been hit by friendly fire. He began to gather a band around him and move back to the east end of town. They picked up the wounded ranger they had left and several more wounded as they retreated.

As they reached the last buildings in town, there was a concerted effort by a group of ten or twelve reavers to break out. The mixed band of Rangers, Troopers, Sikhs and Sioux opened fire and cut them down. That seemed to be the last major engagement of the campaign. There were several flare-ups of fighting, but the main battle ended and mop up had begun.

Carl pulled all of his troops back to the edge of town and set up a picket line to surround the buildings.

At dawn he stood in the bed of an abandoned pickup truck and called, "We will begin to burn the town in fifteen minutes. Anyone in there has that amount of time to surrender or fry."

After five minutes a dirty white flag was seen waving from the doorway of the diner, followed by two figures supporting a third. This brought out other flags and several calls not to shoot. Within the fifteen-minute deadline sixteen figures were standing or sitting in the street.

“Throw down your weapons. Anyone found with so much as a fingernail file will be shot.”

Several rifles, a dozen or so knives, assorted pistols and a fingernail file were tossed from the small circle of defenders.

“Move to the eastern end of town. If you move in any other direction, you will be shot.”

The group moved, carrying three and leaving a body in the street. When ordered to pick it up, Carl was told that he was dead. Carl fired three shots into the body.

The prisoners were taken into custody, searched and put into one of the small silos with the door chained shut.

Meanwhile, the remaining five Rangers and seven Sioux flitted from building to building, searching for hideouts. There was a volley from a building near the grocery and a sheet was seen waving from the post office. Closer investigation revealed a half-dozen women hiding behind the counter. They were brought out, along with three bodies, and taken to where Carl was still standing in the truck. The rest of the town was searched and two wounded Sikhs were found in a small shed.

As they were being carried to the field hospital, one expressed his thanks that they had decided not to burn the place down.

Carl allowed the men an hour's rest and time to build fires and fix breakfast. He asked for volunteers to mount first guard and everyone raised their hands. With a smile, he picked the ten he thought were in the best shape.

He turned his attention to the six women, which had been brought to him. They were a sorry-looking lot. Their faces were smudged with dirt and their clothes were torn and dirty. None of them had shoes on their dirty feet.

Carl looked them up and down and asked, “What’s your story, ladies?”

They looked at each other and shuffled their feet.

“Come on. Get on with it. I don’t have all day,” he snapped, showing the exasperation and weariness.

A skinny blonde gave him a defiant look and answered, “We were taken as skags. The bastards used us and used us. When we wore out, they killed us. We’re tired and hungry and...”

At this point she began to sob and was taken in hand by another woman who snarled at Carl, “Okay, big man, you’ve proved that you can scare a woman. Proud of yourself?”

Carl wasn’t to be intimidated. “We find you in the company of a gang who lives by rapine and murder, sells captives as slaves and thinks nothing of destroying what they don’t want and we are supposed to greet you with open arms and ASSUME you are good little angels?”

As the women started to speak, Carl held up his hand and continued, “Lady, I lost a lot of good men here tonight. I am tired. I am hungry. I am pissed. I have a bad attitude at the best of times and this isn’t one of them. Now, if you want to get into a pissing match with me, bring it on.”

Humbled, she nodded and quietly said, “Sorry. We are what these animals called ‘wives’. We were considered the property of all the males in Baron’s band. When they were tired of one of us or we got sick or, really, for any reason, they got rid of us. Killed us or sold us. We have been starved, beaten, raped and other things we don’t want to talk about.

“Alright, we got off on the wrong foot, but that’s what our ‘story’ is.”

“I’m sorry, too,” replied Carl.

He turned to Zach and asked, “Zach, will you see that these ladies are fed and try to find something for them to wear, whatever they need.”

Zach nodded and led the ladies off. They walked past the row of dead attackers and he heard whispered comments behind him. He turned them over to Brad Coleman of Fourteen Troop and returned to the pickup truck.

By that time, the captives had been released and brought to Carl. There were only fifteen, sullen reavers, one having died of his wounds. Carl was still standing in the truck and he had drawn his 9mm automatic and was holding it idly in his right hand.

He looked the prisoners over and asked, "Where is the Baron?"

The men looked at each other and several gestured towards a foppish man with a pencil mustache, a long leather coat and a sneer on his face.

"I am. What of it?" he said in a condescending voice. "You are dead and there is nothing that you can do to stop it."

Carl smiled a tight smile and replied, "I imagine you are counting on the two parties that we wiped out yesterday? The one with the fat, redhead and the other with the black-haired guy with the missing ear? "

The Baron's face took on a look of confusion.

"That's right, dead. Oh, and the Mahdists? We got them, too.

"Now, here is what you are going to do, Baron. You and your boys are going to cart the bodies down to that barn over there and stack them inside."

"Like hell, we will. You killed 'em, you bury 'em," he said, folding his arms over his chest.

Carl raised his weapon and shot the man three times, through his arms, in the chest. The body was flung backward onto the road and a silence fell over the stunned prisoners.

“You will notice that justice is swift. Your job is to haul the bodies of your friends to the barn.”

“You’re going to kill us anyway. Why should we work our butts off for you?” one of the men asked. There were nods from others.

“I’ll make you a deal, gentlemen,” he answered. “I promise that I won’t kill you and none of the men under my command will kill you and I will not order you killed and I will ask the Sioux not to kill you, when they leave my command. That is what I promise you.

“I also promise you that I will shoot you down like the dogs you are if I have any trouble from one of you. And, if you don’t get the wheels turning, I will shoot you, here and now.”

Several teams of troopers had been going through buildings and hauling the bodies onto the streets. Their own dead had been recovered earlier. Other teams were searching the buildings for weapons, supplies and usable items. There were over a hundred horses in the corrals east of town. A nearby building contained tack, blankets, saddles, packs and pack trees.

While the bodies were being cleared and the supplies stacked in front of the buildings, Carl, Zach, Lamé Horse and Ishar Singh met in the diner. Two of the women captives had offered to prepare breakfast for the troops, who ate in shifts.

“What’s the score, Zach? How many did we lose?”

Zach took a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and opened it out on the table, moving his cup aside. He slowly smoothed the paper out. “Lamé Horse and the Sioux lost three dead and one wounded, who is expected to recover. Ishar Singh and the Sikhs two dead and six wounded, two are pretty badly off.”

Ishar Singh interrupted, “Bhagwan Singh died a few minutes ago.”

Zach lips tightened and he used a stub of pencil to make corrections on his list.

“One Troop lost two killed. Four Troop, one killed. Eleven, one dead, three minor wounds. Thirteen had two wounded, one serious. Fourteen suffered three dead and one wounded. Fourth Rangers had one wounded, seriously, but he is expected to recover.

“That leaves us with one hundred and five effectives. I’m sorry, one hundred and four,” he corrected and nodded at Ishar Singh and made the correction for the loss of Bhagwan.

“Maybe, a half dozen of the wounded are able to fight in a pinch, but the rest will have to be dragged or carried on horse litters. We haven’t found any wagons in town.

“We have captured a hundred and fifty horses, give or take a few; over a hundred rifles and ammunition; a bazooka with no shells; around eighty handguns and ammunition; assorted knives, axes, utensils, clothes and such. There are plenty of pack saddles to carry everything we want to take along.”

As he finished reporting, a trooper who had entered, approached the table and said, “The bodies have been stacked in the barn, Carl. Anything, else?”

“Yes, have the prisoners dig graves for our dead. Deep and wide. And get sheets, blankets or whatever to wrap our bodies in.”

“What are you going to do with the prisoners?” asked Lamé Horse.

“I’m going to take them two days from town and let them free. I figure that the elements will do for them.

“I’m asking that you leave them alone, but I can’t order you to do anything.”

When the meeting broke up, Zach walked out with Ishar Singh. When they approached the line of dead, he said, “Ishar, I am sorry you lost so many of your family, but we couldn’t have wiped out this nest of snakes without your help.”

Ishar Singh looked puzzled. “None of these are my family. But, it will be hard to tell their families about this.”

“Wait a minute. You. All of the Sikhs have the same last name. They’re not cousins or something?”

A smile crossed Ishar Singh’s face. “Ah. Every Sikh male has the same last name, as Guru Gobind Singh commanded, Singh, translated loosely to ‘lion’. Sikh women are all named Kaur, or ‘princess’, sometimes ‘lioness’.”

“I have three sons, Chanda Singh, Uttar Singh and Ram Singh. Their wives are Tripta Kaur, Sada Kaur and Nanak Kaur. That man, the one mounting guard, is also Chanda Singh. We are not related, except by marriage. His daughter is Nanak, married to Ram.”

He laughed at the expression on Zach’s face and clapped him on the shoulder. “Come, my friend, we will convert you to Sikhism by the time we reach our home, then you will be Zach Singh and wear the panj kakaar.”

After the burial ceremony, the expedition mounted up, set fire to the barn containing the bodies of the reavers and headed east. The prisoners were bound and put on horses. Two days out, Carl ordered them stripped and left on the plain.

After another week of slow travel to spare the wounded, they reached the road the Sioux would take to the north. Lame Horse took a third of the horses and supplies and the Sioux rode towards their homes.

The rest of the party continued on and arrived at Mitchell on a warm spring afternoon. The Sikh party had been welcomed and settled into temporary housing to wait for their men.

Carl and Zach reported to the Council and a packed hall. Daya Singh, the guru of the Sikhs, was introduced and formally invited to join their community. Afterwards, a memorial ceremony was held.

Chapter 4

Hidden Bunker

Spring/Summer 2045

The expedition was successful in the sense that we stopped a big band of reavers, rescued almost forty captives and broke up a slavery ring. The down side was the loss of the troopers. I want to settle down and just enjoy my family, friends and neighbors. [Editor's Note: His actions seem to belie that statement]

The Smolleks are hinting that they want a place of their own. I offered to give them half of The Ranch, but I can see that it is not the kind of deal he wants. He is considering a move to Palo Duro canyon, when we decide to settle there. The influx of new settlers has made pushing out mandatory. The water supply is being stressed, according to Mike Blaine and Pete Lincoln. Pete built the new reservoir and the pipeline last year, but if there is a drought we will have a problem. The only problem with the Palo Duro settlement is their distance and the difficulty in supporting them. I want to see a settlement in Gunnison, but the Council wants to start claiming a huge swath of land, with Palo Duro anchoring the southern end. That would also put us closer to the Gulf, where the Jews can try and make contact with the Israelis. We can station a full troop at Palo Duro and there will be, nearly, enough for another one with the settlers. This can be a station for a troop of rangers, too. That would spread our eyes and ears further south. I should talk to someone about stringing telephone lines down there, but I think it is too far.

It seems as if the Sikhs are a pretty good addition to the force. It will take some time to understand their religion, though. I'm still trying to get my mind around the fact that all the men have the same last name and all the women have a different last name, but all the same.

Well, I have to deal with the Finkle matter and see what the council is up to. I, also, have to get to know my family again. I'm tired. Maybe I am getting too old for this and should stick to home.

The court came to order with the Finkles, William Smith and Zach the only attendees. It was short and sweet. The Finkles tried to explain why they hadn't done the required labor and Zach approved William's motion to elevate it to a banishment hearing before the Jefferson court.

"I hate to do it," said Zach later to Sarah. They were sitting on the porch, sipping the latest vintage of wine from the Rosaia's vineyard. It was a little dry for Sarah, but Zach thought it had potential.

Sarah took another sip and decided that this was more to her husbands liking and set her glass down on the end table. "Can't we just ignore it, Zach? I mean, they are a harmless couple and they have their sons to take care of them," Sarah observed.

"I figure it would be like a cancer, hon, if we let one get away with it, others are going to think it unfair and wonder how they can do it. No, we have to make an example of them, as much as we may not want to.

"Anyway, they are really worthless as members of this society. My father would call them 'white trash'. Doing as little as possible to get by." He took another sip of wine and decided that it was all right, better than some of their other offerings. As he remembered, there was no shortage of vinegar in the Commissary.

"Does it have to be a permanent banishment? Couldn't you give them three months, say, like you did to that boy, what was his name?" asked Sarah.

"You mean the Moss boy? That was a different case, entirely."

Zach remembered the case. Last year, a family from the Fundamentalist area had come in requesting asylum. The Council had ordered that a stronger presence be kept along their eastern border to rescue escapees from the farms and plantations. The Morgans and their two nephews, the Wilsons, had been picked up on the Kansas plains, Clarice and Tammy riding a nearly played out mule.

They had been welcomed and offered an escort north towards New Africa, but, unlike the majority of black escapees, had refused. They had wanted to be on the west side of the Rockies, away from the Fundies, and had been part of the settlement of Gold Cove. They had merged with the community and nothing more was thought of it.

A few months later, one of the nephews started seeing Evelyn Mitchelson, who had been seeing Paul Moss. There were some words, a couple of fights ending in bloody draws and Evelyn had married Gilliam.

There wouldn't have been any more said about it, but Paul publicly made threats against the two. Zach figured that it was just jealousy and would blow over with a stern lecture, but it had gotten blown out of proportion with Paul's attitude. A trial was held and, since the banishment was for three months, Zach presided.

By the end of the hearing, Paul seemed to have come to his senses. However, it had gone too far to just drop and Zach had handed down the lightest sentence he could.

Ed Johnson had taken the boy aside and he had disappeared the next day. Three months to the day, he returned with a beard and a new attitude. He apologized to Gilliam and the now-pregnant Evelyn.

It wasn't until a security meeting that we found that he had been asked to wander through the Fundie territory and try to get to Florida and the Israeli settlements. He managed to get as far

as Mobile, but the border with the Israeli's was buttoned up tight. Several times both sides had shot him at, and he decided to head back. His intelligence let the local Jews know that their co-religionists were more than holding their own.

"No, the Finkle case was different and I hope the Finkles are banished permanently. Unfortunately, their boys will probably go with them," Zach finished. He drank the rest of his wine and Sarah offered him hers. He reached over and patted her belly, smiling and happy with the world.

Several weeks later, a patrol came in with a man suffering from exposure and delirious from lack of food and water and the effects of the sun.

They took him to 'Doc' White's hospital, where they had scant hope for his recovery, and Evan Parker of Ten Troop reported to the Security Council.

"We found him about sixteen miles north of the Mound. He was coming from the direction of that weapons cache the Mahdists found several years ago. He was babbling about 'them being all dead', but we couldn't get anything else out of him."

"He is in uniform," Ed observed. "It is in too good a shape to have been worn for years, so he must have a way to clean and repair it. His boots are almost new; that shows that he had a supply of them, must have had a camp or a place to hole up."

"Most men would have gone stir crazy, being alone for ten or so years and I'm betting that he was part of a group, somewhere. And, where there is a group of military, there are weapons, supplies and all sorts of good stuff."

Stretch, who was in town, commented, "Could have found a cache of uniforms."

"True, but One Troop is getting rusty and they can use the search as a training mission, if nothing else. We can send out Four Rangers, too. Make it a real training exercise."

The rest of the Security Council agreed to send out the two troops, though few had any hope that they would find anything. Ten Troop was on a week's leave after their patrol and Evan offered to lead the expedition to where they had found the man.

Three weeks later, when the Security Council was getting worried, Jimmy Finkle and Paul Moss returned. The Council was convened and the two reported.

"We followed our John Doe's trail. He was wandering for a long time. Every once in a while we would find a piece of equipment or wrappers from MREs and we were able to trace him. There had been some wind and the Rangers had to scout around for tracks, but we were always able to find them.

"Somewhere near the western border with Nebraska, we found where he had come out of the ground. It looked like there were a lot of missile silos. When we found the one he came out of, we scouted around and found ten or twelve more. The others were all shut, so Matt decided to set up camp in a nearby clump of trees and do some exploring. After two days of poking around, he thought you might be worried and, also, the guy Four Troop found may have come around and could give us an idea about the place," Paul reported.

"Well, that's not going to happen. Our John Doe died the week after you left, before Evan came back," said Carl.

"Oh," said Jimmy.

"Are you going to tell us what you found while 'poking around'?" queried Ed.

"Yeah, yeah. Sorry. It was pretty dark and we couldn't find any lights that worked. We had to use a couple of portable lights with solar generators, but even with the long fiber cables, we couldn't do more than light up the entry of the silo. It went down a long way before there was a door.

“Four of us breached the doors, wearing the hazmat suits that Ed insisted we bring. The hand detectors didn’t show us anything. No spoors, poison, radiation. Nothing.

“Matt took off his mask and said the air was stale, but breathable.”

“Very scientific,” snorted Ed.

“Well, no one died or anything,” Jimmy loyally said. Ed waved him to continue.

“Let’s see. Oh, yeah. We set up a perimeter around the silo and Four Troop went in with hand lights. There were a lot of tunnels, not like the silos. There were storerooms, but most were empty. A lot of supplies had been used up. We found one room that they must have used as a garbage dump. It had a lot of fifty-gallon drums that were sealed, but contained empty food cans and stuff like that. There was only one can without a sealed lid. I don’t know, we figured it was for garbage.

“By the time we left, we were down to the last of our batteries and exploration was halted while they recharged. That’s when Matt sent us back.”

“Thanks, gentlemen,” Ed said, dismissively. “Get some chow and rest.”

When they had departed, Ed looked around. “This sounds like more than a pipe dream. It looks like we may have stumbled on an abandoned base. If those silos had been filled, they were probably empty, now. A lot of missiles had been fired off at the Muslims and the South of the Border crowd.

“What puzzles me, is that there is no mention of any military installation on any of the military maps we found. I’m worried that there was something else down there. Biological, gas, something. I hope that Matt has the smarts to be real careful.”

Zach spoke up. “Ed, sounds like we need someone on the ground to check this out. Lets send a troop with a couple of wagons. From what Jimmy said, there isn’t much there, but they didn’t get through to the other silos, before they left, that is.

“We could send some of the big portable lights with the 24-inch spool of wiring. That should get us pretty far into the tunnel and we can take John Singleton with us to kluge together any extension or look at the existing wiring.”

Stretch offered to bring Three Troop (Cave). He said they needed some exercise. The others discussed bringing another of the valley troops along, too. It was finally decided that Three (Cave), Eight (Black) and Twelve (Gold Cove) Troops would go. Zach was to go along as the advisor, with Stretch Linder and Harry McGregor as seconds. They would take six wagons and supplies, lighting systems and miscellaneous equipment.

The next day, at midday, the expedition left and Stretch Linder detailed scouts and flankers. They made good time and camped by a slow moving stream. The horses were cooled down and watered downstream from the camp. Eight Troop was assigned to KP and Twelve Troop took first guard. The tired troopers ate and settled in for the night.

It was an uneventful stay and the troops were up, breakfasted and ready to move at daylight. They pushed hard that day and contacted Matt’s scouts at nightfall.

They dry camped in a hollow. Three Troop took first guard, with Matt’s men and the heat of the day dissipated slowly. By morning, there was a chill in the air. The troopers dressed and ate quickly. A few hours later, they came to the top of a long rise and halted. In front of them was a vast, shallow crater.

“It’s an old strip mine. They dug coal here,” said one of the troopers. “These open pit coal mines were shut down years ago and filled in, or they were supposed to be.”

They circled the old mine on a dilapidated road. In several places they had to fill in the road, where runoff had cut small gullies, to get the wagons across. Eventually, they met two lookouts and were directed to the road down and met Matt's main body in camp.

After greetings, Zach, Stretch, Harry and John Singleton met with Matt, who brought them up to speed. "We found the shaft without much of a problem and there was enough light to see at the bottom. There was a complicated door system. The outer door was ajar, but the inner door wouldn't open until we had closed the other door.

"When we opened the inner door, there was a kind of 'whoosh' and it seemed like air was being sucked into the facility."

"Reverse pressure," noted John. He had taken a pencil from his pocket and was twirling it with his fingers while he spoke. "Could mean something nasty in there that they wanted to keep from leaking out. How far did you penetrate into the base?"

"Well, there is a big room after the inner door. You know, a control room, or something. There are desks and computers and stuff. We used our flashlights to explore the room and there are a lot of papers and notebooks we collected. They are over in my tent, if you want to look through them.

"Funny thing, though. All of the light bulbs were broken and a lot of the lamps and fixtures were trashed.

"Anyway, the room had three other doors; one directly opposite from the entrance and one each on the opposite walls. We checked all the doors. The ones on the left and right led into hallways with rooms on either side. The other one was sealed with a torch. It was welded shut and it looked like it was done pretty recently.

“Our batteries ran out and we have been recharging them as we go, but it is pretty slow and we didn’t have anything to make torches with. Mainly, we have been waiting for you.

”Oh, there were four small shacks on the rim,” he continued pointing out the decrepit buildings. “They were abandoned. The equipment was looted and a small warehouse was burned. They could have been guard posts and equipment storage. That may have been where the Mahdists got the stuff we stole, er, liberated. There were tracks all over the place and signs of a camp.”

The other complimented him on his initiative and he took John to look at the papers.

Zach and the Troop advisors organized camp and inspected the entry shaft of the complex. After lunch they met again and John looked puzzled.

“There isn’t much use in the papers and stuff,” John said, the inevitable pencil traveling along his moving fingers. “A lot of them are duty rosters, logs and like that. One or two are instruction manuals for the equipment. The dates on them are, at least, a year old. I was expecting something like files from a commander, but we probably haven’t found that office, yet.

“I want to set up lights and do some exploring deeper in. The welded door and the reverse pressure system worry me. I think this is some kind of chemical or bio warfare facility. We have to go slow and easy.

“Matt, I need a squad to help me unload my equipment, if you don’t mind.”

Zach asked, “John, if the power is up in the facility, why don’t you just tap into it?”

John grinned and answered, “I don’t know what the power supply is, down there. If this is some kind of chemical or bio facility and the power fails, I don’t want to have to run out of there with only a flashlight. I want to be able to move and move fast.”

“Ah,” was the only reply.

The lighting equipment was unloaded and John began setting the light catchers up. These had been developed in the twenties and consisted of one-foot square panels with light receptors and mirrors. They would take the smallest amount of light and, using the mirrors, create a reflector pocket, which would trap and augment the light and turn it into electricity. The ones that John had were found in a warehouse in a small town and were the latest design. His could use starlight to create electricity. Mitchell and the outlying settlements used the earlier designs, which used direct sunlight or bright moonlight to generate power.

As part of his equipment, he had several large spools of fiber cable. This was a light, translucent cable used to string the lights together. The globes were made of shatter resistant plastics and used just a trickle of power to generate 75 watts of light, though they could generate up to 150 watts with a full current load. This cable was fed through the dismantled intercom system, since it couldn't be fed through the airtight doors. A sealant was applied at both ends to retain the integrity of the closed system inside the complex.

He, with his team, set up a bank of receptors on gimbals. These contained a tiny electric motor that kept the receptors turned towards the brightest source of light. A storage unit contained in the receptors stored power while the receptors tested for a stronger light source. Zach understood a fraction of what John was explaining as the engineer went through the motions of setting up the equipment. Finally, lights had been strung into the underground complex and the receptors were supplying a strong current to the globes.

When the equipment was set up and everything ready for entry into the complex, it was getting late. As John pointed out when Zach wanted to get a fresh start in the morning, it wasn't going to get any lighter down in the facility in the morning.

“Light or not, I want everyone to get a good night’s sleep and be alert in the morning,” Zach said. “I don’t want anyone making stupid mistakes through being tired.”

John reluctantly agreed and they ate and turned in early.

Chapter 5

Into the Earth

Spring/Summer 2045

I understand John's push to explore, but we don't know what's down there. I haven't told anyone, but I am really worried that we will expose ourselves to something. I am going to have the lid to this place ready to seal behind us and have someone at the bottom of the shaft with a radio to let the troopers topside know if they need to shut it. Only volunteers will be going down and if something happens, the rest will be ordered to close and seal the complex. There are enough things floating around and killing people without our adding to the misery.

Zach, Stretch, John and Matt led a squad of ten troopers down the shaft into the complex. Zach and John, with half the troopers, took the left corridor. The rest turned right. The corridors ran at an angle towards the central room. There were doors on either side, facing each other in pairs. They advanced, attaching bulbs every ten feet to the light cable and the light cable to the metal wall with industrial tape.

Zach and his men had pistols ready. The first door opened to reveal a storage room. The room was cluttered with trash. MRE wrappers, papers, broken equipment and rags were mounded throughout the ten by ten foot room. The cable was looped and taped inside the door and a bulb attached; they went through the few lockers and cupboards in the room, but found nothing but more trash.

The next room, on the other side of the corridor, contained several dozen cases of rations, blankets and bedding, clothing and a rack of arms. Zach set one of the troopers to make a list of the contents of the room.

Women's barracks and a shower complex were on the left side and men's on the other. Lockers and footlockers contained personal belongings and clothes. The women's shower was covered with a black mold and smelled.

"Trap dried out," commented John as he turned on a shower to fill the trap. He also ran water in the three sinks and flushed the toilets. They reentered the corridor after leaving another trooper to itemize the contents of the two barracks'.

The corridor continued to another door. John gingerly tried the knob and eased the door open. It gave access to another circular structure. A curving wall had been constructed on the left. The hall continued along the right-hand wall to another door. The room's dimensions seemed to match the size of the control room. A door, with the words 'Office of the Commander' and 'John McGuire, M.D.' was situated in the separating wall.

"Ah," said John. "Here's where we should get some info on the facility." He opened the door and was confronted by a secretarial area. A desk stood facing the outer door and in front of an inner one, almost like a guard on the inner sanctum. The desk was of a blonde wood and was neatly arranged with in- and outboxes, a pen and pencil desk set, the normal broken desk lamp and a clean blotter. There were two hard, wooden chairs with flat cushions on either side of a small table with magazines. The lamp here was also smashed.

Through the inner door was the office of the commander with an array of file drawers and plaques on the wall. The furniture was 'military bland'. The cabinets were putty colored with neat tags labeling each drawer. The desk was metal with a gray insert of some plastic material. There was a mock leather couch and two desk chairs. Everything was covered with a patina of dust. The office had not been used in a long time.

John directed one of the troopers to look for plans or a white paper of some sort that explained the purpose of the facility. He walked to the wall and read the plaques. With a grunt, he pointed to several diplomas.

“This guy was not just a doctor of medicine. Here is a doctorate from Perdue for biology, another from M.I.T. for genetics. I would guess that this facility is a bio-weapons facility and we should not, I repeat, not open the central door for any reason. I’m guessing that the door was sealed for a purpose and we should not disturb it.

“Greg, run back and find Matt and Stretch. Tell them, under no circumstance, open a door to the central room. Even if it is not welded shut. Go.”

As the trooper ran from the room, John looked at Zach with a grim face. “Zach. We should bury this place and not put it on any maps. I’m scared and not afraid to admit it.

“There were billions spent on this kind of crap and I would bet that this is one of the labs scattered over this country, hell, for that matter, over the whole world.”

Zach nodded. He felt a chill crawl up his spine when he imagined this facility falling into the hands of the Mahdists or the Fundamentalists. He asked one of the remaining troopers to get some help and strip all of the usable items from the complex and bring them to the surface. He told her to warn anyone entering the facility not to open any door not marked by an ‘X’ of the industrial tape. The other trooper was ordered to take a roll of tape and mark all the doors to the central area of the complex, then find the other exploration party and let them know what they had found.

John and Zach left the office, passed the trooper marking the door and continued along the curved hall, letting out cable as they went. Since leaving the office, the complex seemed

chillier and more foreboding, sinister somehow. The two men came to another door and looked at each other.

Finally, Zach said, “This is ridiculous. We’re acting like a couple of kids in the local haunted house.” He grasped the handle and briskly shoved the door open. Another corridor receded in front of them with the matched doors.

The first door was labeled with a small sign as the commander’s quarters. A quick inspection showed a small room, single bed, overstuffed chair and a large television. Again, everything was covered with dust.

“Notice anything?” asked John.

“Lights still work,” returned Zach, turning on the overhead lights.

“Yeah. Whoever broke the rest of the lights in the place was afraid to touch these or had some sense of propriety swimming around in his muddy brain.”

When they left this room, there was only ten feet or so remaining on the spool of cable. John laid the nearly empty spool on the floor of the corridor and placed the pouch of bulbs next to it. They decided to find Matt and see what his party had discovered.

Matt was standing in the main room when they reached it. He had found a storage room with spare light bulbs and was replacing broken bulbs in fixtures that were still able to accept them. Leaving several of his troopers to continue the work, he joined Zach and John.

“Beyond that door,” he said, pointing to the door on the other side of the room, “we found a corridor with rooms on either side. They were mostly storerooms. Pretty much empty. One of them had a lot of electrical equipment in it and Stretch is looking it over.”

At that moment, Stretch joined them. “This place is really automated. There are several computers in there just monitoring what’s back of the wall, in the central core. Temperature,

humidity, air quality, the works. Another is measuring radiation, of all things. As far as I could tell, they are, or were, bombarding something with low level Gamma particles”

John shook his head. “I don’t like this more and more”

Stretch continued, “The generator is in there, too. It’s a really compact model like the commercial ones made in the Thirties. The uranium packets look to be about three-quarters full and the last maintenance date was last month. The first was eighteen years ago.

“This place has been doing something for a long time.”

“Did you find another module at the end of the corridor?” asked John.

“Yeah. It was a rec room. Ping pong table, exercise equipment, tables with cards and board games. Snack machines. A couple of coolers. You know, the usual.

“We ran out of cable and came back. I’m having the rest of the squad itemize the stuff. There are a lot of office supplies in one room. It looks like another one was reserved for trash and discards.”

John ran down what they had found and what he thought was going on. He proposed splicing the two cables together and exploring one direction or the other for as far as the cable would go, and then use flashlights or what lights that could be salvaged, if they had bulbs that would fit.

Zach told Stretch to start emptying the place of anything that was portable, but not to disturb the machine room. Stretch suggested that they fill the wagons they had brought with them and send them back and fetch more. He said the place gave him the creeps and he would send out more rangers to keep an eye on the surrounding countryside.

After the details were worked out, the cable was rewound from Matt’s side and spliced onto the cable from Zach’s side. While they were working on this, several troopers were busy

replacing lights and others began to strip the place and load the wagons. Stretch had rigged a platform on pulleys at the head of the shaft and the rifles, MREs, blankets and other salvageable items were loaded and hauled up. Boxes were found in which to pack the papers from the office.

Zach and John, followed by six troopers, explored the rest of the doors off the corridor. They found a shooting range on the left side, with more weapons and ammunition, along with targets, earpieces to suppress noise and assorted loading supplies. The room on the other side contained a sports-court and sports equipment.

At the end of the hall they found another door. It revealed a mess area. Dining tables, chairs, a full kitchen, coolers and freezers gleamed in the light. When they had entered the room, they discovered a grisly sight. A body lay on the floor amidst the scattered pieces of a chess set. He had been shot several times and his clothes were saturated with dried blood. A 9mm automatic was the sole item still on the table. John checked it and found that the magazine was empty.

The rest of the squad had spread out to check out the kitchen and a sound of retching came from near the big walk-in freezer. As the rest of the troop turned that way, Mike reeled into the dining area, vomit dripping from his chin and his face white. He looked stricken and pointed in the direction of the open freezer door.

John and Zach hurried past him and skidded to a stop in the open doorway. The freezer was empty except for the shelves along either side. Each shelf contained a body. Zach was taken aback, but entered the sub-zero temperature to investigate. He counted twenty-eight bodies. Some had signs of violence, while others seemed peacefully asleep.

He backed out of the room, as if nervous about turning his back on the corpses. John looked at him with questioning eyes.

“Beats me,” Zach said. He started to close the door, but then ordered that the body on the floor be carried in. When the task was finished, he closed and slid the stainless steel pin into the handle.

“What the hell went on here?” asked John to no one in particular.

Zach shrugged his shoulders and tentatively opened the walk-in refrigerator. He looked in on an empty room. Nothing but stainless steel shelves. With a relieved sigh, he closed the door again.

Zach left two troopers to collect equipment and stack it on the tables to be sorted out later. The rest were more than happy to follow Zach and John out the far door into another corridor. The doors on either side revealed small labs. Zach recognized microscopes, petrie dishes, bunson burners and the usual equipment. There were a couple of machines he didn't recognize, but John identified centrifuges, gas spectrometers and more. There were small refrigerators in every room, but John cautioned against opening them and ordered them taped shut with tape and marked 'Do Not Open' in indelible marker.

The door at the end of the corridor opened into a much larger version of the other labs. Massive equipment stood on the floors. The door to the central room was welded shut, like the others, but racks of biohazard suits were neatly hung on either side.

John muttered, unhappily, and told the troopers not to touch anything as he gingerly walked around the room. He nodded at some of the equipment and shook his head at other pieces. Finally, he walked over to where Zach and the others stood.

“We need some experts,” John said. “I can work out the electrical stuff, but Bob Allen, the doc would be useful. A couple of engineers, maybe, Sally Spires and Pete Lincoln. Carlos Winslow the chemical engineer and Sam Ling, the botanist. And, if we are going to close this

place off, a builder. Mike Fleetwood has had some experience with demolition and filling in those missile silos. I heard him speak of it.

“Zach, this is so beyond me. We really need some experts.” He sounded almost desperate as he finished his appeal.

With a nod of agreement and a pat on the shoulder, Zach said, “I agree with you, John. You’re a scientist and if you don’t understand this stuff, you have to know how I feel.

“Let’s check out the next corridor. We’re almost out of cable, again. Come on.”

They opened the door and, again, saw a corridor stretching before them. Instead of doors, this was lined with bookshelves and cabinets. The books covered a wide range of topics, from Scientific, to History/Sociology, to Classical and Modern Novels, to Biographies. Every genre seemed to be represented. The cabinets revealed CDs, DVDs, racks of memory sticks for music and movies and assorted video games.

“All Right!!” exclaimed one of the boys.

They came to the next door with only a few feet of cable left. They opened the door and found several troopers testing the light fixtures and inserting bulbs. The room was the entertainment room. Small cubicles lined the left-hand wall. Each was equipped with a monitor and a gaming system. Clusters of chairs and sofas dotted the room and several large video screens were attached to the rest of the walls. Recliners with individual screens and headphones were set against the walls, between the video screens.

“A hexagon,” John said. “The complex is laid out in a hexagon.”

When several of the troopers and Zach asked him to explain, he made a simple drawing in the dust of a coffee table illustrating his point. He drew in the large rooms and labeled them with letters, M for the main room they had entered from the shaft, O for the office, K for the

kitchen, L for the lab, EN for entertainment and EX for the exercise room. The kitchen, the entertainment and the exercise room didn't have doors connecting them to the central core.

"Okay," said Zach. He detailed the troopers to continue getting as many lights working as possible. He and John returned to the main room and climbed out of the complex to the outer air. The wind felt good after the stuffy atmosphere underground.

They hadn't realized how long they had been down there. The sun had touched the horizon and it was going to be dark soon. The wagons had been filled and tarps tied over the loads. Piles of salvaged goods were neatly stacked by the side of the shaft.

Stretch and Matt joined them and Zach reported what they had found. They were discussing the bodies in the freezer when Harry came up to them.

"Zach, I found this in the woman's barracks," he said as he handed them a small book. It was a diary, the kind a young girl would have. The lock still contained the key. "I was looking through it to see if it had anything about what happened here."

"Right," grinned Matt. "You were hoping for descriptions of her sex life, you voyeur."

Harry took a half-hearted swipe at him, blushed and walked off with a grin.

Zach slipped the small volume into his pocket and said, "Stretch, when you come back bring the people that John has in mind and three or four more wagons. Oh, and some boxes or crates. There are a lot of media down there and we might as well take it.

"Explain this place to Mike Fleetwood and see what it would take to close it down and seal it off."

"Now, Zach," said Stretch, spitting in the dust. "This would make a great secondary camp. Especially as the generator is almost full of fuel. We could have an outpost with a great view and pretty nearly safe from visitors."

“We thought of that,” John answered. “But, I don’t want anyone getting curious and releasing whatever is in the central core. We have to assume that it is still alive and that a bacteriologist was in charge because it is biological. We can also assume that what is in there was not put there for fun.

“Call me an old woman, but the more I think of this place, the more I get the willies.”

“Okay, old woman,” Stretch laughed. “You win.”

That night, in a comfortable chair in the entertainment room, Zach read the diary. Off-duty troopers watching movies, listening to music, reading or playing video games, occupied the rest of the room. The lamp on the table at Zach’s elbow had been liberated from John McGuire’s desk.

After awhile, John and Stretch came in and asked what Zach had found out.

“You were right, John. This is a research station, run by the military. The lady who wrote this,” he said as he held up the diary, “was a researcher. She has complete and utter contempt for the military, by the way.

“She is excited about this upcoming breakthrough. That was sixteen years ago. They were doing research on a bug that would target specific ethnicities. The military wanted them to design a bacterium that would infect Middle-easterners and Orientals. You might remember, those were the populations, which were feeding the Muslim movement.

“Then the pandemic hit the U.S. They changed their research to find a cure. Of course, no luck. The base was locked down to keep the infection from wiping them out. It was stocked with supplies to last a very long time. A very long time.

“About six years ago, after ten years of isolation, things started to go bad. The soldiers, about ten guards, wanted to get out. My guess is that they were getting stir crazy. The author,”

he flipped to the front of the book, “a Dr. Pendergast, teetotaler probably, notes that the liquor ran out about that time. Ten years, they were rationed or they had a real big supply.”

“I would say both,” said Matt. “A lot of bottles and five gallon plastic jugs were in the trash room.”

“Well, anyway,” continued Zach, “There were now two camps. Dr. McGuire tried to keep a lid on, but there were fights and two deaths. By this time, most of the ‘real food’ had been eaten and there were MREs left. Enough for another decade.”

“That would make me want to get out,” quipped Stretch. “Ten years of MREs for breakfast, lunch and dinner gives me vertigo. I would rather become a cannibal.”

“Oh, that is one reason they froze the dead,” reported Zach. “Well, over the next year, eight died of suicide, three from fights and one, absurdly enough, from natural causes. By the end of the next year, three more suicides and four murders. That was nineteen out of thirty.

“McGuire was one of the early suicides. With him gone, there was nothing to stop a general exodus, but the last message they had was that a dirty bomb had exploded upwind of the base and they were afraid.

“Here is the part that Harry was looking for. The other twenty or so went through an ‘orgy period’, as Miss Pendergast puts it. Sex and a pharmacological brew accounted for several other deaths, including Miss Pendergast’s, for there the story ends.”

“What do you think happened, Zach?” Matt queried.

“I think that the same old thing kept going on. Each year fewer and fewer survived. They killed themselves off, committed suicide, whatever. From what we found in the kitchen, I would guess that the last two were playing chess and the loser, or winner, shot the other and then left. That was probably the guy that Ten Troop found wandering around.”

“What an end,” murmured John. “Stuck down here all those years. Same old faces, same old things to do. Food running out along with their sanity.” He shivered.

Zach clapped his hands to bring the group out of its funk. “Look here, gentlemen. Tomorrow, Stretch, you are going to take the wagons and get going back to Mitchell.

“John, I want you to make a systematic search of the papers in the office and see if you can come up with something, anything, about what they found, discovered, whatever, here.

“Matt, you make sure that there is no slacking. Guards patrolling or hauling stuff out of here. Anyone caught screwing around in the entertainment room is to be assigned burial duty. However, give anyone off duty free time down there. Rewards for looking sharp.”

“I will supervise the salvage operation. The only rooms I will not touch will be the lab and the lab corridor. That I will leave for the experts that Stretch brings back.”

With that, lights out was declared and the room emptied amidst grumbling and complaining.

“Some of the doors in the weapons room had padlocks on them,” said John. “Tomorrow, why don’t I put one on the door to this room.”

Zach grinned and said, “Why don’t you just do that, old son.”

Chapter 6

Salvage

Summer 2045

What a find. We got some pretty useful stuff from the Science Complex. Not only weapons, furniture, equipment and entertainment in the form of books, movies and music, but a lot of scientific equipment. Of course, we will have to wait for Stretch to come back with the 'experts' to see if any of it has any use to us.

John and I have been looking over the generator, but they must have built it on site or brought it in through the core. The case is too big to get out the shaft, even if we dismantled it. We caught four troopers sneaking into the entertainment room, despite John's lock. It appears that several sets of keys were lying around and one of the boys found them. They became our gravediggers. We haven't had any problem since.

The weather is fine, but I have had the salvage stacked in the main room, in case it rains. The office, exercise and main rooms have been picked clean. We let each trooper pick two games, five albums and five books. The rest we started packing in such boxes we could find. Mostly, MRE boxes that we salvaged from the trash room. I was planning on having the next set of miscreants burning trash, but everyone has been on their best behavior. Morale is good.

Patrols have gone out, but no one has seen anything. It keeps the troops sharp, patrols the area and they bring in fresh meat. It has been three weeks and pretty much everything has been done that can be. I hope that Stretch gets back here before too long or morale may not be so good.

Ah, something is going on. The scouts have ridden in and they are excited, not alarmed. Hopefully we can get the rest of the stuff packed up and get out of here.

The eight wagons came over the crest of the hill and drove down the switchback to camp. Zach declared a holiday and greeted the new arrivals. The trip had been uneventful and the town was excited about the find. The Council had agreed with John's assessment and wanted the complex buried.

Sally Spires was eager to get a look at the place and Zach took them down for a tour. John had fixed enough of the lighting system to illuminate the whole complex. There was a flurry of questions, which Zach was not able to answer. The scientists were eager to look over the labs and Sam broached the idea of opening the central core. He was quickly disabused of the idea and took it with good grace. There wasn't much to see in the stripped out rooms, except the showers and bunks in the barracks.

Emmerson Johnson, a fussy little man, tried the showers and nodded happily at the idea of washing the travel dust out of his hair. Zach left them with John when they reached the labs and went to see to the preparation of a welcoming feast.

The scouts had brought in several fresh steers and slaughtered them the day before, so there was plenty of meat in the cooler. Stretch had brought canned and dried vegetables and fruits. By the time the scientists had gotten over their first excitement and were ready to eat, the food was ready.

Immediately after the meal, the travelers took turns using the showers and everyone gathered in the entertainment room for drinks (brought by Stretch) and conversation. They were all agreed that the equipment from the labs, at least the portable items, would be welcome in Mitchell. John reported what he had found from the papers in the office.

The newcomers were horrified at the scope and direction of the experimentation. McGuire, apparently, was trying to find a virus or bacterium that would attack, fatally, all

genetic codes except Caucasian. There were notes to hint that he was going to refine the result to take out all but the Teutonic and Celtic subsets of Caucasians. That gave them pause and instantly brought up what they had read about the mid-Twentieth Century.

The good news was that this line of research was aborted for the new attempt to fight the pandemic flu virus. The bad news was that this second line of research was a failure. As to what was in the central core, John was able to determine that a dozen genetically altered viruses and bacteria were stored there. The video feeds to the central core had been damaged beyond repair, so there was no way to look into the room or rooms.

The barracks had been arranged for the scientists and Sally Spires was given McGuire's room. Good nights were said and everyone turned in to get some sleep. The morrow promised to be an early and busy day.

A troop was assigned to empty the wagons and bring the cartons and boxes to finish the packing of the papers, books and videos and the dismantling of the labs. Zach waited to pack the wagons in a predetermine priority, in case some items had to be left behind.

Meanwhile, Mike Fleetwood surveyed the complex with an eye to sealing it.

"From Stretch's description, I didn't think we could fill in the shaft with concrete. Too much would be needed. We can't blow it up for fear of disrupting the central core. Just covering the top of the shaft would leave it open to being uncovered by the wind." He glanced at Zach out of the corner of his eye as they stood by the top of the shaft. "You know that we are going to have to fill it, don't you?"

"Oh, I thought that that would be the only way. There are going to be a lot of unhappy troopers when they get that news. What would be the easiest way?"

“If you dig dirt out of the floor of the quarry, you are just going to have a lot of holes and that will tell anyone that something is buried. It wouldn’t take long for that someone to find this place and, with enough hands, to excavate it. What I would suggest is to get boulders from the floor and dump them down first. Then, have a work gang start breaking down the crater wall nearest the opening and use the dirt to fill in the shaft. With luck, we can take down enough to stretch all the way to the complex and make it look like a landslide.”

Zach looked at the crater wall. It was a long way from the shaft.

Mike saw the speculative way Zach looked at the crater wall and laughed. “I’ll set off a couple of small charges; hardly enough to slop water from a full glass, to start a couple of slides and that should do the trick.”

The troopers were divided into four groups, two to pack and two to haul. When the complex was cleared of all salvageable materials, a sizeable pile was sitting by the wagons. The scientists had directed the haulers and had organized the goods by priority. Two of the groups were assigned to start packing the wagons and the other two were to gather rocks and boulders to dump down the shaft. Mike had made several sledges to haul the stones and horse teams were harnessed and the task was begun.

Zach, Mike, Stretch, John and the scientists made one more pass through the complex to check that nothing important was being left behind and to gather the light cable as they left. When they climbed out of the shaft, rocks and boulders were levered in and the filling process began. Mike set four small charges and, when lookouts signaled with mirrors that there were no strangers in the area, set them off. He created his desired landslide and it was within feet of the shaft by the time the dust cleared.

Shovels and the sledges were used to move the dirt and fill in the shaft around the rocks. After two days of hard work, the wagons were packed and the shaft was filled. Mike set more charges on the slope and brought down most of the crater wall. The end result looked like a natural collapse and the wind would smooth out the sharp edges. The positioned the biggest boulder they could find over the shaft to discourage curiosity.

With careful packing and some overloading, all of the salvage was packed. It took another day to haul the laden wagons up the steep switchback road. Two teams had to be harnessed to each wagon for the pull. A new camp was set up near a spring with a small grove of cottonwoods. Scouts still patrolled the surrounding plain, but nothing out of the ordinary was seen.

Only the sighting of a Mahdist patrol disturbed the weeklong journey. It sat on a hilltop and watched them. Zach glanced back and saw a clear trail behind them and hoped the Mahdists didn't take it into their heads that they were anything but a group of traders or scavengers.

When they reached Mitchell, the weary group had been away for almost two months. The haul was considerable and William Smith would have an interesting time dividing it up. The books, games, videos and video systems were stored in the house which had been designated as the library. The blankets, pillows, weapons, MREs and other common goods were delivered to the commissary and the scientific equipment dropped off at the hospital.

Zach hurried home to see his family and wash up for the Council meeting and their report. Sarah stood on the doorstep, shading her eyes, as he trotted down the road. He stiffly dismounted and took her in his arms. "I love you, Zach," she murmured, "and I hate to have you gone."

He kissed her again and was surrounded by a whirlwind of children and dogs. Young William showed him his arm, which was in a cast. “I fell out of the tree,” he piped. Zach picked him up and swung him around and knelt to hug Charles, who planted a wet, sticky kiss on his cheek.

He knelt there a minute wondering at the peace he felt. A couple of years ago he was a wanderer with no roots or ties. Today he was part of a solid community trying to rebuild the world, with a wife, four kids and a place of his own. He shook his head and strode into his home, where he changed and he, Sarah and Leslie rode back to the Council meeting.

The meeting was well attended and most of the crowd was excited. Too excited, Zach thought, by just the expedition’s return. He took his seat at the place reserved for the Justice of the Peace, a position he had held from the inception of the community. The rest of the Council took their places and disposed of the usual meeting opening business. After the readings and reports from the committees, during which Zach was paying more attention to the notes from John on the expedition, John Singleton II was called to report on the expedition.

He gave a quick sketch of their findings and theories on the complex. He sat down after a quick rundown of the salvage.

Mike Fleetwood, head tilted back with his hand scratching in his thick, black beard as he spoke. It didn’t matter what the occasion or the weather, Mike always dressed in jeans, work boots and a long-sleeved shirt. He gave a short report on the sealing of the complex and answered a few questions with dry humor and sly wit. He might look big and dim-witted, but he was sharp with a quick tongue.

The new mayor, Benton Robison, thanked the members of the expedition. He ran through a few more items of old business and rapped his gavel for new business. Samuel

Steinman stood. He looked around at his family, his small, dark haired wife, pretty daughter, three sons.

“Your honor,” he intoned. He was a rabbi and his rich, rolling tones seemed more suited to a synagogue than the Council Chambers. He, and his family, had arrived last fall. They were Jews on their way to the Israeli colony in Florida. They had traveled from a small town on the coast of Madison called Eureka. “Your, honor,” he repeated. “I would like to propose that we form a colony in the Palo Duro Country. My family and I would, of course be part of it. I have a list of families who would join us.” He held up a sheet of paper and gently waved to towards the podium. Zach, as the Master at Arms side of his Justice of the Peace persona, got up and retrieved it.

As he was walking back towards Benton, he glanced at the names on the list. There were some old and some new families. This motion brought a buzz from the audience. He looked around and saw that a lot of the families on the list were at the meeting. He handed the list to the mayor and reseated himself.

The mayor cleared his throat again, a habit he had, and said, “The floor recognizes Mister Steinman.”

The tough old farmer bowed slightly and continued, “The town of Mitchell is getting crowded, as we all know. I am among the several hundred immigrants that have joined this community. Several months ago, a large number of Sikhs and women rescued from the reavers swelled our numbers. This has put a larger strain on our resources. The valleys are full and can’t take any more. It is time we established another colony. The Palo Duro Canyon is a large area that can support a good many families. It is empty, large enough to hold many more families than have signed up, and there are, or were, ranches, farms and small towns, though

Amarillo has been burned to the ground. As it has been discussed that Jefferson should lay claim to as much territory as possible, the Canyon would establish a claim far to the south.”

“Discussion?” asked the mayor.

Several hands shot up. The mayor recognized TJ.

“What is the status of the canyon? Are there any inhabitants? I know that we send patrols down there on a regular basis. What have they seen?”

The mayor turned to Ed and arched eyebrows in a question.

Ed levered himself to his feet with his cane and said, “According to the logbooks and reports of the troops, the town of Amarillo is gone, like Samuel said. There were several ranches in the lower valley and the park buildings in the north, but no inhabitants.

“The latest patrol to the area reported that there are a couple of ranches still standing and the park complex is in pretty good shape. The initial, oh, for a better word, lets say colonists could occupy these buildings until they get settled and build places of their own.

“The only military concern I would have is the narrowness of the canyon. The widest place is about twenty miles, but the average is only six. Snipers on the rimrock could cover most of the valley floor. I just want to make sure that the colonists know what they are getting into. We can make up a troop from among the colonists and, I propose, that we permanently assign one of the ranger troops there. There are enough new recruits to form another one.”

He nodded to Benton and resumed his seat. The mayor called on another member of the audience for a question. Milo Campbell, a short, thin man with an infectious laugh, stood, “It’s my understanding that any citizen of Jefferson can depart whenever they wish. If that’s the case, no one has any say in what some of us want to do.” He looked around belligerently and sat down to a scattering of applause.

William Smith, in his capacity as Quartermaster, stood to answer. As usual when speaking in public, his round, black face was beaded with nervous sweat. "I agree with Milo. Anytime anyone wants to leave, the gate is open. There are a few things to think about, however. Milo, how many hours do you owe the store? How many chits are outstanding to other people? I would think those have to be settled before you make a break from the rest of us.

"Another thing. We, or, at least, I don't want the Palo Duro Canyon families to break off from us. I am just concerned that help is a long way off. Even if we could run telephone lines there, the closest help is in Rio Grande, which, if you remember, was cause for concern, being so far from Mitchell.

"Now, I like the idea of spreading out a little. We have a lot of people here, newcomers from everywhere. We have the people, let's do it, but Palo Duro may be a little out of the way."

Samuel stood and answered, "William, it is my understanding that this settlement was set up with a smaller number of residents that we propose. We will have a solid scout of the area. We will have weapons, supplies and experience. This seems to me enough.

"Sure," he said dismissively, waving his hands, "we will be isolated. Yes, the Fundamentalists and the Aztecs will be around, but I have faith that we will be strong enough. There are deserts around and getting to us won't be easy. We will form a band of Rangers and there will be more than enough to defend the settlement."

Zach could see where this was leading and he stood up when he was recognized. "I would guess that this Palo Duro settlement will be set up regardless of any arguments that are presented. I make a motion that a patrol in force be organized to explore the canyon and report back on buildings, water, defenses, etc. During the meantime, we can get the people who are going set up.

“One advantage of this move will be to move a large part of the cattle, sheep and llama herds south. That will free up the pasturage in the lower valley for crops. We need to fence off a section to hold slaughter animals, but we could gain almost a hundred acres. That will preclude the necessity of extending out of the valley onto the plains,”

He sat down and the motion was carried. When the meeting broke up, Daya Singh stopped Zach.

“Zach, we Sikhs would like to go to this Palo Duro, too. There is a lot of land there and we are many. There is not enough land in any of the current settlements for all of us. We have discussed the situation and decided that, if you will have us, we would like to join you and your people. We came over to Canada from India during the war and we know that it will be many years before we can go back.”

“I don’t see why not, Daya Singh. We have a real melting pot, but you and your people will be expected to obey our laws. You and yours have worked hard since you have arrived here. This community is proud to have you, and lucky. If you want, I can speak with Samuel?”

“Oh, yes, please. That is very kind of you.”

Zach shook the guru’s hand and went in search of Samuel. When he presented the Sikh’s request, the man was delighted to have so many recruits. His only question was whether they knew how to herd. Zach assured him that, if they didn’t, they would learn. More importantly, they provided a large contingent of fighters.

Having passed along the news to the Sikhs, he went in search of Ed and Carl. He found them at the situation room, pouring over maps.

“Zach, glad to see you,” Carl said, looking up from the topographical map of the canyon. How would you like to lead this expedition?”

“Right. Then I would come home to an empty house and find that Sarah had converted to Islam just to spite me. Gentlemen, she would hang me with an old rope if I took off again so soon.”

They all laughed and started planning the trip.

“I think this is a job for One Troop and First Rangers. They are the most experienced. Matt may not be too happy about it, Janice just had their second, but we need someone with experience and he is the best we have. Plus, he has been in the canyon several times on scouting and scavenging expeditions.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” observed Ed. “He just got back from a long scout down the west side of the mountains and should have some sort of a rest, but...”

“You think a troop of Rangers and One Troop is enough?” asked Zach.

“Oh, more than enough. The Rangers can run point and find anything out of the ordinary. Remember, this is a scout, not a war party,” answered Carl. “Anyway, how could they go wrong? I’ll be there to baby sit them. Nothing can go wrong with Nanny Carl on the job.”

Chapter 7

Palo Duro Canyon

Summer 2045

Looks to me like a big gamble. We will certainly be spread out. There is no way we can ever get help to them if they get into some kind of trouble. However, I was overruled and we would have lost a lot of families no matter if my recommendations had been followed or not. Palo Duro Canyon became some kind of Promised Land, somehow. I can understand the Jews; it put them closer to the Gulf of Mexico and the Israeli colony in Florida, but the rest, who knows. Sometimes an idea gets stuck in your head and you can't let it go. Sort of like my idea of getting to the Rockies, maybe.

Well, now we can control who goes and what they take and there won't be any hard feelings and the new colony will still be part of Jefferson, though a distant part.

Three days later, the troops rode out of the valley. The troopers took it as a lark. They stopped in at the Rio Grande settlement for a day to rest the horses and re-supply. The scout stayed close to the mountains, looking for stopping points on the way to Palo Duro. Once at the canyon, they worked their way down from the cap rock to the valley floor.

They spread out and moved on the park buildings. Great rolling clouds began to build up in the west, presaging a storm. They looked through the cluster of buildings and, as the storm began, forced the doors of the visitor center and used it as a headquarters.

After a week of investigation, Carl was satisfied that there were no occupants, though there were signs of past campsites by several different bands. Whether these were reavers, Fundamentalists, Aztecs or others was impossible to tell from the evidence that was left.

The last night in the canyon was spent at the visitor's center, again. They topped onto the plain as the sun was coming up, splashing color onto the mountain. No one noticed the figure that emerged from the rocks as the last trooper disappeared from sight.

While the two troops were investigating the canyon, the new colonists had been busy gathering supplies, equipment and the tools necessary for settling in a new and, possibly, hostile environment. Thomas Williamson, who had learned to become a wheelwright on his own, was busy working to turn out enough wheels for the wagons being constructed. Each family was allowed one wagon and a team and a half for the journey. Four other wagons were allowed for carrying community supplies like plumbing and lighting fixtures, the six solar power units and the light cable, glass for windows, doors, framing supplies and building tools.

The final count of families was impressive. All of the Sikhs, except for six that decided to stay with their troops; TJ and his family and the Mills'; the oldest Rosaia son and his family and all the Jewish members of the community.

Samuel Steinman explained to Zach, "We will be much closer to the Israeli settlement in Florida, this way. Who knows, maybe we can meet up with them."

When Zach pointed out that they were still half the country away from Florida and that the Fundamentalists, who had no love for Jews, were still between them, Samuel just smiled and shrugged.

The Council decided that four hundred head of cattle, three hundred sheep and all the llamas, except for a male and three females, would be trailed with the new colony and free up the Pasture for farming. If the new settlement was a success, the anticipation was that they would be the main producers of meat and wool for the rest of Jefferson. The Rosias sent a set of vines with their oldest son and his family.

Zach argued that the report from the scouts may be negative and the canyon was uninhabitable, but the settlers stubbornly refused to be deterred. After the last item was packed, except for day-to-day items, which could be quickly stored, and the last parting gifts exchanged, a quiet settled over Mitchell.

“Pretty tense,” observed Zach to Sarah one night. “I wonder if they know what they are doing. What do you think, love?”

“I don’t know,” Sarah answered, leaning into the circle of his arm on the porch swing. “Do you remember the feelings that you had when you saw Mitchell? I remember seeing this place after Rawlins. It seemed like heaven. So safe. I think that a lot of them were feeling like fifth wheels. The Sikhs are a close-knit group, but there was no place for them to be together.

“Oh, I know that another valley could have been found, but, in the meantime, they were just ‘visiting’. I know what its like to need a home, someplace to belong.

“And the Jews. They want to join their own. I don’t know, but since I first thought of it, it seems to me that the Jews I knew always thought of Israel as home, even if they never intended to even visit the place. It maybe strange, but that’s what it seemed like.”

Zach stood. “All right, little miss philosopher, time for bed. All of this thinking has given me a headache.”

Sarah stuck out her tongue at him and flounced into the house in mock anger.

Two day later, the expedition rode through the Front Door. They were tired and saddle sore. There had been no incidents along the way. After the troops were dismissed, the Council met to a packed house. Rather than conduct a formal meeting, the mayor simply turned the podium over to Carl.

“Nothing much to report, for the good news. We spent a week looking around.” He pinned the largest scale map to the board and used the pointer to punctuate his remarks. “We spent the first night at the ranger station and visitor’s bureau. The facilities were in good working order, surprisingly. There was a large kitchen in the lodge, which was fairly new. There was no electricity, the solar panels had been stripped from the roof, but solar units will supply enough juice for the purpose, if the equipment is working, that is, until new panels can be installed.

“The lodge has twenty-two rooms. The bathrooms in each room have running water and the showers work. The mattresses were a mess, so you will want to be sure that you bring your own bedding. There is a lot of room in the visitor’s center and it has working toilets, I might add. The water supply had good pressure.

“I would recommend that your headquarters be set up there. I don’t like the defenses, but that was a given, anyway. The cap rock is all around you. There will have to be sentries mounted on top, at least for a few weeks.

“There are eight ranches that haven’t been burned out. The city of Amarillo and the few towns and the other ranches and farms are gone, except for the foundations. New places can be built on them, though. There are a lot of wells on the properties, a few with windmills still working.

“There is a lot of territory down there. I am glad that the Sikhs decided to join the colony. That gives you a lot more men to help patrol the place. We didn’t see any new signs of visitors, but there were quite a few old campsites.

“All-in-all, it is not the most ideal place to plant a settlement, but as far as that goes, where is.”

The audience was silent for a moment, and then a tumult broke out as many of the attendees shouted questions and comments. The mayor and Zach were able to bring order, finally, and an hour later the last question was answered and the room emptied.

Carl shot Zach a rueful look and shook his head. "I wouldn't settle there, myself. Oh, its good cattle and sheep country. There's plenty of water and grass, but it's so open. Maybe I'm too used to this place, with its mountains and narrow openings. Something about that place spooked me. Like ghosts were watching me. Yeah, I had the feeling that we were being watched, but nothing concrete. There wasn't a soul for miles."

With the news brought back by Carl, the wagons and herds moved out two days later. The Sikhs provided a wide screen around the train, which traveled south on the old highway. Each night was spent at a prepared campsite.

William Daniels, a former Sergeant Major in the Marines, was the military leader for the expedition. The Council appointed Jasper Poole, who had been in charge of the commissary, as the civil leader.

It took them a month to make the journey. The only event of note was an attack by a large pack of wild dogs. They managed to pull down a calf and scatter the sheep before the herders were able to chase them away, killing six or seven of the pack. Two of their own dogs were casualties, but recovered. They were observed closely for signs of rabies, but didn't appear to be infected.

Late in the evening, the last of the wagons drew up in the yard by the visitor's center. The travel weary colonists stretched and brushed the road dust from their clothes. They left the cattle on top of the cap rock for the night. They quickly set up several of the power generators and hooked the cable to the center's power supply.

Daniels set out sentries and ordered the scouts to make a sweep before the new moon set. One of the scouts returned after a few minutes and asked the commander to follow him. Curious, the ex-soldier picked up his weapons and strode after the scout. Two hundred yards from the buildings they halted and Venkata Singh pointed to the ground. William was puzzled until he realized that there were no tracks of any kind in the dust of the faint trail.

They returned to the rest of the party and William doubled the guard. He spent the night catnapping and making rounds of the sentries. The troopers heard nothing throughout the night and dawn brought a sense of relief.

William Daniels met with the troop leaders and instructed the Rangers to divide and make a wide loop to either side of the trail and spread out to seal off an escape up or down the canyon. Half the members of Fourteen Troop spread out and advanced directly towards the canyon wall, flitting from cover to cover among the rocks and trees.

No shots were fired during their maneuvering and they reached the trailhead without seeing anything out of the ordinary. The trail ended at the mouth of a cave ten or twelve feet above the canyon floor. William was hesitant to send in any of the troopers and finally approached the side of the opening himself. He picked up rock the size of his fist and tossed it in. The sound of the rock echoed and reechoed and William decided that the cave was of considerable size. As he was about to round the corner and enter the opening, a short laugh froze him in place.

“All right, all right,” a wizened voice called. “I’ll give you a belly full, you try and come in.”

“Hold on,” William called back. “We’re peaceful.”

“Yeah, right,” the voice replied. “I seen your brand of peaceful before. I got a lot of peaceful folk buried over yonder. Pack up and get out or join ‘em for all I care.”

“I’m coming in, now. I won’t be armed. We just want to settle here. We’re from Jefferson, up north of Denver. We’re starting a settlement here. Raise some cattle and sheep and llamas.”

“Well, get back to Denver. This is my home and I like it fine, just the way it is.”

Daniels grasped his rifle by the barrel and laid it in front of the cave. He added his pistol and two K-bar knives. Then, wiping his hands on his pants, he stepped away from the canyon wall and slowly moved to the entrance of the cavern.

Facing the opening he peered in, trying to see the source of the disembodied voice. To continuing silence he stepped over his weapons and, with his hands raised in front of his chest, entered. A few steps in, he discerned a form sitting in an old woven lawn chair. The figure was holding a shotgun across his lap and made no move to bring it to bear.

As his eyes became used to the half-light, he saw that the figure was an old man with long white hair and beard. He had thin arms and legs and William thought he looked like an anorexic Santa Clause. He wore a park ranger uniform and Smokey Bear hat. He had a smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eye.

“Got any tobacco?” he asked. “Ran out a couple of years ago. Took some off a wrecker, but used that months ago. Name’s James Ramsey. I was park ranger here. Last one, I guess. Who’re you?”

“I’m William Daniels, Mr. Ramsey. Like I said, I’m, well, we’re from Colorado. Part of Jefferson. We’ve come here to settle.”

“You brung enough of ya’. What gives you the right to come in here and settle?” He shifted in his seat and swung the gun towards William. The old man saw Daniels tense and cackled, “Mister Daniels, this old gun could only hurt you if I knocked you on the head. I ran out of shells a couple of weeks ago. None of the other guns I picked up from the wreckers has any shells, neither. So, just settle down and relax.”

William figured that the old man was probably hungry and called out to the increasingly nervous troopers to send in some food. When a trooper entered, William told him to take everyone back to camp and start bringing the cattle in.

Ramsey took the cornbread and jerky and began to eat. William sat on the floor while the old man finished his meal. “Thanks,” he finally said, combing the crumbs from his beard. “Haven’t had much in the way of vittles for a couple of days. Not as spry as I used to be, but I managed to knock over a prairie chicken.”

During their subsequent conversation, William learned that James Ramsey had burned the city of Amarillo and the towns, ranches and most buildings in order to discourage wreckers. He had lived in the park buildings since the plague had swept through the country. Wind-blown dust had buried the road to the park.

On two occasions he had been invaded by wreckers. The first band had stayed in the lodge and trashed the place. When they left, they had taken all the supplies they could find and tried to burn it down, but James had managed to smother the fire before it more than scorched the floor. The next time it had been two men on a motorcycle and he had ambushed them before they knew he was around.

He had stocked the cave with a few meager supplies, a mattress and blankets and hid there when he saw strangers. He used an old broom to sweep out his tracks between the lodge and the cave and sprinkled dust and leaves to cover the brush marks.

When the old man had finished eating, the two men walked back to the lodge and the curious settlers. Suddenly, Ramsey seemed shy and embarrassed. He hesitated and shifted behind William's back when the strangers surged forward to greet him. Soon, however, he was moving among them and shaking hands and showing some of the youngsters a spot where arrowheads could be found.

Daniels had a squad of Troopers make a survey of the ranches Carl had identified. Another squad rode in the other direction to scout terrain and find a couple of off-shoot canyons with water and grass to hold the herds. Jasper Poole, acting mayor, asked the women to prepare the lodge and visitors center for occupation. The souvenir stand would contain the commissary and supplies were carried in.

When the holding canyons were found, the herds were moved there and penned. Posts were set and ropes were used to close off the mouth of the canyons, but the animals were content to graze and rest. Several of the younger boys were left to watch and ordered to fire off shots if there was any trouble.

By nightfall of the first day, the lodge and visitor's center had been set up as the headquarters of the new settlement. Riders had come in reporting on the state of the buildings and water sources they found. A park map of the area had been filled in with the details of the finds and, already, there was talk of moving out to the outlying ranches. Jasper was hesitant to have the group break up until a thorough search had been made of the settlement area.

William Daniels and Ishar Singh had supplies brought to Ramsey's cave. They included MRE's, spare weapons and ammunition, blankets in plastic, sealable totes and a stack of mattresses that they wrapped in plastic sheeting and taped shut. Several boulders were rolled to the cave to strengthen the defensive position. Frames were built to hold bales of hay, both for forage and to prevent shots into the cave from ricocheting. The cave itself was big enough to hold thirty or forty people and several dozen animals.

That evening, Jasper declared a holiday for the morrow. He asked Mrs. Bertossi to organize the cooking and John Smith to build a rough fire pit and spit. Ishar Singh offered to do the cooking of the sheep on another fire pit. Everyone was in a holiday mood when they broke up and scattered to their beds.

In the morning, two cows and four sheep were taken to a dry, dusty canyon and slaughtered. The hides were saved and the Sikh women began brushing marinade on the mutton. John Smith, with the help of eager hands, built a series of stone lined pits and racks of rebar or heavy duty spits. He found chain and heavy pipe and made a series of tripods from which to suspend the racks over the fire. When Jasper commented on them, John explained that the racks could be pulled to the side and the meat turned or sauce applied while the meat was cooking or brought away from the fire to keep the meat warm.

By early afternoon, all was ready and they began to line up. There was a call by Reverend Mike Jackson for a short prayer of thanksgiving. Silence fell over the crowd and the Sikhs stood in respectful silence until the prayer was finished.

The sentries were relieved so they, too, could participate. Musical instruments were retrieved from the baggage and all enjoyed an impromptu concert. The Sikhs' instruments sounded strange to the non-Indians, but not unpleasantly so. Towards the end of the evening,

there was a form of dueling musicians where one would play a couple of cords and another would take it up, to pass it on to another. Good-natured boos and groans, along with cheers greeted the results of this contest.

Jasper Poole, Ishar Singh and William Daniels sat away from the crowd and planned the next day's itinerary. Some of the men would look for suitable sites for fruit trees, truck gardens, quarries for stone and clay deposits for bricks. Several ovens would be needed for baking and general cooking. The small restaurant in the lodge building would have to be expanded. The troopers were divided into three sections, one to mount guard, another to gather wood and scout and the third to rest.

The reverend asked if he would be allowed to conduct religious services in the visitor's center, the only room large enough for the purpose. He would get the desks and displays moved to the walls and set up a lectern and altar at one end. The building would be turned into a school and recreation building the rest of the time. The three men had no problem, as long as the Sikhs and the Jews were permitted its use, also.

By the end of the second month, several families had moved into the standing ranches and farms. TJ and his family and the Mills' had built a double house at the mouth of the canyon where the llamas were corralled and were starting on a weaving mill. The Brown's, who had the sheep, would share the facility when the animals started producing.

Several Sikh families had built houses on a rise above the river where it formed a bend and there were several acres with rich bottom land. The buildings formed a strong fort, with walls between the buildings and a clear field of fire. The younger children took turns as lookouts on the flat roof of the tallest structure.

The rest of the settlers were headquartered in the park buildings, though several other families were scouting for building sites, which offered water and some natural defenses. There had been no incidents, but tracks had been seen on the cap rock.

The cattle had been released to graze along the river and kept from straying too far by younger riders. The sheep and llamas fed among the rocks at the foot of the canyon walls. Several wild dogs had been shot and the deer population was thinned for meat and to eliminate the competition for graze. Pindar Singh had stalked and shot a mountain lion, but no others had been seen.

One day in late August, when the sun was blazing down on the community, a patrol led in three strangers. They were from over the border in Oklahoma. The oldest man, the leader, had an amused look on his face when he was brought before William Daniels. He dismounted with the agility of a much younger man and removed his hat and wiped his brow. He had long, white hair and wore jeans, boots and a long-sleeved cotton shirt. His companions looked like they had been made in the same mold. Both were big men, making their mounts look like Shetland ponies.

“Afternoon,” said the older man. He stood there with a half-grin on his face.

“Welcome,” returned William. “Come on in, we were just about to eat.”

The party dismounted and entered the restaurant. The room was full and William led the strangers to a corner table that was reserved for him. When the four had settled into their seats and the servers had placed a platter of fried chicken, biscuits, beans and potatoes on the table, filled the glasses with water or cups with ersatz coffee and left, William dished food on the plates and settled down to eat. William didn’t like conversation when he ate. He felt the time to talk at the table was when the coffee was served and it was time to digest.

When the plates were pushed back and the coffee cups filled and William had begun jabbing at his teeth with a toothpick, he looked at the strangers and said, “Name’s William Daniels. Welcome to Palo Verde.” He finished with a grin to match the older man’s own.

“Pleased to meet you, William Daniels. My name is John Short and these are my nephews, Jim and Albert Short.”

“Now that the social amenities are out of the way,” William said, leaning forward, “what’s your interest in our little community?”

“We were just checking on Mr. Ramsey. Your boys surprised us, up on the rim.”

“They’ll do that to you. Surprise me sometimes, too.”

He called James Ramsey over and introduced him to the newcomers. When there was no sign of recognition, William asked, “Mr. Short, how can it be that you were looking in on James, here, when James doesn’t know you?”

“I’m glad you asked me that, Mr. Daniels,” he rejoined, seeming to enjoy the exchange. “That’s because Mr. Ramsey doesn’t see us when we look in on him. He gets a little excited when he sees strangers. We look in on him from time-to-time. We drive a deer where he can find it or some wild hogs, whatever. Once in a while we will leave a few canned goods with his supplies. Not enough so he knows we were there, but a few things, now and again.”

“I do recall that there are times I thought I was losing my mind. I’d find cans that I could have sworn weren’t there the day before. Figured I was getting daft,” exclaimed Jim.

“All right,” William conceded. “Anything more than that?”

John took out a plug of tobacco and bit off a small chew, offering the plug to the rest of the table. “Well, now, I suppose that leads us to the question of what you are doing here, yourselves. This canyon area was pretty much a dead zone. Too far for the Mexicans or the

southerners to claim. There are not enough of us to settle it, we have a small population and we're happy where we are.

“Once in a while some of the scavenger gangs will travel through, but there isn't anything left for them to loot. They spend most of their time over towards the east.”

Will took a sip of coffee and considered how much to tell. He finally set his cup down and folded his huge hands around it. “We are from Jefferson. Up north beyond Denver. Mostly, we're refugees from the Mahdists, Sioux, New Africans or the Fundamentalists. We started out as escapees from the Mahdists and traveled west, picking up people on the way. When we settled, we had a pretty open immigration policy and we took in a lot of people the Sioux ‘relocated’. Wiped out a few Reaver bands and freed their captives. Fought the Mahdists and the Aztecs and took in those who wanted to join us.

“Over the last few years, we got a group of Jews from the west coast who wants to head towards Florida and the Israelis there.” He pointed to the Silvermann's. “We picked up a large group of Sikh's from Canada.” Here he nodded towards Aldar Singh and his family. “There were Fundamentalists who got tired of New Jerusalem and others we just took in.

“Fact of the matter is, we got to big. We settled near the original settlement, but still outgrew ourselves. So, we got together a group and here we are. There's enough room here to spread out, though the defensive situation isn't all that great.”

He finished and sat back in his chair, causing it to creak ominously under his weight.

John Short took a drink of his coffee, after adding three spoonfuls of honey. “Good,” he said. “You know about the Mexicans. They send a patrol across the river, the Rio Grande, every once in a while. It comes up from El Paso and makes a big circle. The, what do you call them, the Fundamentalists; they don't go much past the Dallas/Ft Worth area. We're up in western

Oklahoma. We raise a few cattle and sheep; do a little farming. No one messes with us much. We are out of the way.

“The area along the eastern flank of the Rockies is pretty empty. Between all of that are a few small settlements and gangs of scavengers. Once in a while the scavengers get together and there’s a big raid. Hundreds of ‘em. Last time that happened was a year or so ago. They went east into Louisiana and Arkansas. Killed and burned a lot,” he shook his head at the memory. “Anyway. You should be pretty safe from everyone except the scavengers.”

He sat back, too. Sipping his tepid coffee. The two men stared at each other for a few minutes. Neither wanted to be the first to break the silence. Able Short abruptly stood. He looked around at his brother; “Uncle can sit like this for hours. Let’s get some air.”

John chuckled, “Used to be a horse trader.”

William smiled, too. “Used to be a sniper. Finally, we’ll keep peaceful, if you will.”

They shook hands and the Oklahomans left with several jars of honey.

Chapter 8

Strangers

Summer 2045

The Palo Duro 'colony' is gone. I still have my doubts about that. They do have a good number of fighters. More than we had when we got here. The council may think I'm an old woman, but they did agree to send a Ranger detail down there after a couple of months. There's that.

They held the hearing for the Finkle's and they were banished. They took their 'banishment allowance' and decided to go back to the Fundies. I was sorry to see the boys go. Surprisingly enough, they came back three weeks later. They said they couldn't live under Fundie law after being here.

Ed, Carl and I have been looking over the map and discovered a strange phenomenon. The scouts have been mapping sightings of our neighbors. When we map them out there is a definite pattern evolving. Expectedly, around the Sioux towns, there is a wide band of empty land. No one living there and it is used for hunting, herding, etc. However, the same is true about the Mahdists. They have pretty much created a ten to twenty mile 'dead zone' around their territory.

Down around the fundamentalists, the same thing is happening. There is a wide band of empty land between them and the Mahdists and them and the Rockies (us). It's harder to tell with the Aztecs because they are so far away, but there is a natural band around the Mormons. Mostly deserts, but its there. Even the Bear Flaggers, Monroe, Washington, Columbia and all. The different groups have stopped spreading out and are consolidating their territory.

I wonder if this is a breathing spell or the calm before the storm. I know the Mahdists, the Fundamentalists, New Africans have been beating up each other pretty badly and those fights are pretty much at stalemates. I'm hoping that they will settle down and start rebuilding and let us go after the Reavers.

I'm going to propose that we send scouting parties out to verify the theory. See what the Council will say. Now that we have nothing but leisure time, we may have a new line of study – Modern Societies.

Zach actually proposed that the Rangers be sent on long-range scouts to map the corridors between the Mahdists and the Fundamentalists. The Council weighed the matter and gave tentative approval for several short missions. Carl revamped the duty rosters and First Rangers was sent east.

The new land opened up when the majority of the cattle were sent to Palo Duro Canyon was planted with wheat, corn and barley. The truck gardens were expanded and canning supplies were high on the priority list of scavenging parties, again. A dozen teams were fielded for the baseball season and the Fourth of July was celebrated in Mitchell. The town was packed with settlers from the outlying valleys.

There were two brewing operations going and there was a lively competition for bragging rights. The Rosaias had managed to establish their vineyards and they bottled several hundred bottles of various grape and vintages.

The only mar to the summer was the death of Carlo Pelegrino. He had a massive heart attack while working on a carving. Jan, his wife, wasted away and died a few weeks later. They were laid to rest on a small rise in Black Valley. The whole community mourned their passing.

Evelyn Gustafson rushed into the War Room one day in mid-July. She had a ham radio set and was positive that, eventually, there would be contact. Her normally placid face was flushed and she couldn't talk for gasping. Zach thought she was having heat stroke and called for a trooper to fetch the doctor, but she grabbed his arm and held him up until she got her breath back.

"No, no," she gasped. "I got something. I got something." She threw the paper down on the table and collapsed into a chair.

Ed lifted the note and read it. He looked at Evelyn with a puzzled air.

The woman, recovered now, snatched the paper from him and snapped, "A message. I got a message on the radio."

Slowly, understanding dawned on Ed's face and he grabbed the message and reread it, "...looking for survivors...Government of ... espond..."

Evelyn said defensively, "It wasn't very clear. The mountains and a weak signal, but that was all I got. I sent out my call sign and a general location, but I don't know if they got it."

"Evelyn, that was great. Good job and I'm sorry I ever doubted you," Ed said. "But, next time, let's not tell them where we are. We don't know whom this is from and, I'm sure that you would agree, we should take it slowly. Right?"

She looked stricken and her hand flew to her open mouth. "Oh, I didn't think"

"Now, don't you worry. I'm sure everything is fine. I'm going to send this trooper back with you. I want you to show him how to work the equipment. If we get through again, he will try to get some information from them and we can take it from there."

When the two had left, Ed, Carl, Zach and Matt discussed the situation. They decided that they would apprise the Council of the development, but they didn't know enough to draw up more than a broad plan of action.

The next message was longer and clearer, "This is Brigadier General Thomas March. I am the representative of the Government of the United States. Please, identify yourself and give your location. I am one eighty miles northeast of Denver, heading west. Over."

Carl returned: "Head north towards Fort Collins, turn west on I-80. You will be met. Over." He refused to answer any other messages and reported to the Council. The members of the Council were split over their response. Some wanted to ignore the messages and others felt that they should welcome a representative of the U.S. Government warmly.

Zach stood, after patiently waiting for the discussion to die down, and said, "Speaking for myself, I am all for meeting this General March and finding out what the situation is. However, we don't know if this is a genuine message or a trap. I'm not too crazy about just letting him know everything and anything. It won't hurt to meet him somewhere away from here and see what the situation is."

The majority passed the motion that Carl, Zach and the mayor would meet General March and invite him to Mitchell, if everything was legitimate. As Carl, Zach and Ed left the meeting, Ed quietly asked Carl to get One and Four Troops and First Rangers field ready and have them meet by the Mound in the morning. "And, Carl, let's keep this between us. No reason to get anyone else excited." Carl grinned and left to find Matt, Kim Ward and Jonathon Silver and deliver their orders.

Ed looked a question at Zach, who smiled and said, "I would have gone for more, but we may be coming in hot and need relief."

The next morning Carl, Zach and Benton Robison rode out with a small escort and a wagon with supplies. The rangers formed a loose screen ten miles ahead with the two troops flanking the road, out of sight.

Late that afternoon they saw a line of vehicles coming towards them. Zach suggested they make camp in a small grove of trees with a good supply of water. While the tents were being erected, Carl slipped out and met Jonathon Silver.

“Looks okay, Carl, but, I don’t know, there seems something wrong. There’s a couple of hummers, five trucks with men in them, twenty more men on horses as scouts. There is another truck with supplies and equipment. For all the vehicles, there’s no tanker for fuel.

“One of the boys tried to get closer to it, but the horsemen made it too hard.”

Carl complimented him and asked that he notify Matt and Kim to close in a little and be prepared to help, if they needed it.

By the time Carl returned, the camp had been set up and several strangers on horseback had ridden up to the fire. The men were all in uniform and the sergeant in charge of the detail saluted and said, “Compliments of General March. Are you the party from Jefferson, sir?”

When Benton replied in the affirmative, the man sent one of his men back down the road. “Permission to dismount, sir?” he asked and, when given permission, dismounted his men. The stacked arms and cooled down and watered their mounts. Zach tried to engage the NCO in a conversation, but was gently rebuffed.

A half hour later the lead car of the convoy pulled into camp and a boisterous, smiling man stepped out and walked towards Zach, Carl and Benton with his hand extended. He wore a field uniform with six rows of combat ribbons and an array of medals and patches. His pistol was pearl handled and looked like a showpiece. While introductions were being made, NCOs

barked commands and the soldiers in the trucks disembarked and began setting up neat rows of tents, digging latrines and setting up a field kitchen. Within an hour the military's camp was completed and the men mustered in front of their tents for inspection.

General March invited the three envoys to join him for the inspection and Carl took the opportunity to closely study the men. All were dressed in the same camouflage uniforms. Their badges and patches were squared away and precisely placed. Weapons inspection revealed clean rifles, full ammunition pouches and bright, sharp bayonets. Carl pretended to mishandle any weapon given to him for inspection.

Prior to the meeting, the Jeffersonians had been warned to say nothing of any engagements or combat experience they had. Carl wanted to give the picture of amateur soldiers or inexperienced militiamen. "Let's not show any cards we don't have to," was how he put it. The escort was encouraged to slouch and dirt was rubbed on their weapons.

While dinner was being prepared, the envoys and the General sat and chatted. The General continually evaded questions about the east, promising to address the matter after dinner. He kept turning the conversation to the state of affairs in Mitchell. They downplayed the number of citizens and didn't mention the number of settlements or their defenses.

Zach gave the impression that they were farmers and herders with little or no combat experience. He told the General that they managed to hide when Reavers, Mahdists or Fundamentalists were about.

The General invited the three to dinner in his tent, a large marquee that was divided into sleeping and living areas. The table was set with china and silver unpacked from a padded box and candelabra held red, white and blue candles. Wine and spirits were offered and the men sat

down to a dinner of roast goose, fried chicken, roasted potatoes and corn picked from an adjacent field.

After the meal, General March offered cigars and had the orderlies fill the wine glasses. “Gentlemen, its time to speak of serious matters, I think.” When his pompous statement was met with smiles and nods, he continued. “This country has gone through troubled times. The cowardly bombing of many of our fine cities, the plague, internecine warfare between the survivors and a complete breakdown of law and order.”

He drew on his cigar and studied the light of the candles through his wine before restarting what sounded like a long lecture. “But there are fresh winds of change blowing through the land. Yes, gentlemen, fresh winds. We have rebuilt the government of this great democracy. There is a new capitol in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. We have suppressed the vile gangs of looters, rapists and murderers in the east. We are spreading the light of order and security throughout the land.

“I, gentlemen, am the harbinger of that change. I bring the torch of justice. We will reunite this country and rebuild the ruined cities and towns.” He leapt from his camp chair and began striding in the confined space of the tent, like his ideas and goals were confined and bursting to escape their cage.

“But, don’t be fooled, gentlemen, there is a lot of work to be done. We must organize the people. Unite them under a central command. Forge a military machine to stand up to those who stand in the way of the Dream. Tough choices will have to be made. And the cost will be high in both money and blood. Believe you me, the cost will be high.”

When he took a breath and paused to seemingly admire the words of his speech, Zach cleared his throat and asked, “What do you want from us, General, sir?”

“I’m glad you asked, Zach. What I will need from you and your small community is three-fold. I will need supplies. I will need men. And I will need obedience.

“You may ask, how will I accomplish my lofty goals? The answer is simple. Organize. Now that we have some communications back and the interference is fading by the day, we will set up military camps and send out expeditions to tame this land that has degenerated into violence. We will declare military law throughout the land.

“I will assign Major Garrett and thirty men as a cadre in your town, if I don’t decide to make it my headquarters. They will mold your young men into the force necessary to re-conquer this land. We will have a universal draft, of course, everyone must do his part. We will have to make a complete collection of weapons to a central depot to ensure that there are guns for our soldiers. Food will be brought to a central commissary and evenly disbursed to all.”

Carl raised his hand like a student in school, “Excuse me, General, what about the government and the Constitution? When will we have elections and send delegates to the new congress?”

General March shot him a sharp glance. “You must realize, Carl, that we will be under martial law for quite some time. I, as military commander, will be the military governor of this region. When the lawless elements are put down, then we can talk about representative government and self-rule again.”

Later, in their own tents, the three discussed what they had heard. “This guy is as phony as a three-dollar bill,” spat Carl. “He has ribbons from Vietnam, the Gulf Wars and there are a couple I suspect are from earlier wars. His men have patches from all branches of the military. There were marine, army, navy and air force units represented. And they weren’t even together!

“Brother, I would say this guy is an opportunist. Plus being a blowhard. Collecting all the weapons and food in one place and under his control. We would end up being serfs or slaves by the time it was all said and done. And under the guise of ‘martial law’.”

Benton, who had disapproved of the deception, shook his head and said, “I agree with Carl. I’m a politician and I can recognize b.s. when I hear it. This guy is shoveling it out with both hands. But, what do we do?”

“He has a couple of hundred men, all well-armed and, I suppose, well trained. Even with the two troops and the rangers, we are outnumbered and in a box. I don’t think he will let three hostages out of his sight and there are guards all around the camp.”

Zach sighed. “Well, we got ourselves into this. I agree with Benton, we don’t have much of a chance to escape from camp. If we get ourselves out of here, it will be on the move.

“Carl, tomorrow you take a couple of the boys and head for Mitchell. We’ll tell them you are going to prepare a welcome for them, something. As soon as you are out of sight, Matt or Kim will contact you for instructions. Pull both of the troops back to Mitchell and gather as many troops as you can.

“Here’s my plan.”

They spent the next several hours refining Zach’s plan and woke the next morning to the sound of reveille. The troops were breakfasted and camp struck. The General entertained them when they broke their fast. He was reluctant to let Carl go, but saw the wisdom of the move.

Shortly after breakfast, while camp was still being dismantled, Carl and two of the escort rode out. They were met by several rangers and Carl gave instructions for One and Four Troops. The First Rangers were to remain and shadow the column.

Riding in the command vehicle with the General, Zach commented, “We don’t see too many mechanical vehicles anymore, General. How have you managed to find fuel for these?”

The General smiled and blew out a stream of smoke from his cigar. “Well, Zach, these are a new kind of motor. See the grid on the hood? Those are solar concentrators. They take the sun and concentrate the light generated electricity into the small dynamo that powers our engines. One of my men developed it. The wonderful thing about them is they use current technology with a little invention of our own. Put the two together and we have cheap, plentiful energy.

“That,” he continued, jabbing his cigar at Zach, “is one of the many advantages of joining us in the rebuilding of this once great country.”

Zach took some time, during the next break, to look over the contraption attached to the hood of the General’s vehicle, but when he started to open the hood to inspect the engine, a sentry stopped him. The collector system was Greek to him and he joined Benton for lunch.

The mayor was displaying signs of nervousness the closer they came to Mitchell. Zach tried to calm him down before he made the General suspicious. They had been stringing him along with stories of the rich farmlands and pastures to be found in Mitchell. Zach’s idea was to keep him thinking on the loot and not on any dangers. He came across as an eager rube, not too bright and anxious to please.

Zach managed to meet with a ranger several times during the journey. He was satisfied with the reports that the arrangements had been made according to the plan and that all was in readiness. He was on pins and needles on the morning they came in sight of the Mound. He indicated to the General that the small hill marked the entrance to the valley.

The General ordered a squad of cavalry to enter the canyon and investigate the valley. He smiled as they rode off and explained that it was military protocol. Zach nodded in return and smiled back. He didn't let the General see the turmoil he was feeling inside.

By the time one of the squad returned to report, Zach would have sworn that he heard Benton's heart slamming against the mayor's chest and that Benton was about to faint. The soldier the sergeant sent back to report saluted and said, "Sir, there is a welcoming party just in the mouth of the valley. I didn't count, but there appears to be a dozen families and food is already on the table."

The General saluted and negligently waved the column on. They met Carl and a dozen of men at the opening of the Mouth. They greeted the General and led them in. The dust raised by the Jeffersonians obscured the General's view and coated the lead car. The General pulled down his goggles and tossed the end of his cigar onto the road.

Suddenly, a single blast of a bugle split the morning and Carl and his honor guard galloped ahead, dodging around the three tanks lined up at the end of the Mouth. The General's driver slammed on the breaks and was hit in the rear by the following truck. General March yanked out his pistol and leveled it at Zach's head and snarled, "What is this?"

"General, calm down. One shot and there will be a blood bath. The far end of the Mouth, the canyon we are in, has been sealed by now. You and your column are trapped.

"Of course, we are trapped with you and I realize that our lives are forfeit if any shooting starts. We would like to talk on more even terms than you have given us, so far. We have a lot of questions that need answers.

"What do you say? Truce?"

The General looked around and saw that he was not going to shoot his way out of this without heavy casualties. He had noticed the boulders on the cliff top and realized that the only way this could end was with the elimination of his unit.

He looked back at Zach and Benton. “We seem to have a, what is the phrase, a Mexican Standoff. You can probably take us, but it will cost you. And, as you pointed out, you will be among the first casualties.

“I don’t suppose that any of you are important enough to make hostages?”

Zach smiled ruefully and shook his head.

“So, what do you propose we do? It is getting a little warm, both figuratively and literally, here.”

“We will uncork the back end of the bottle,” Zach said, waving over his shoulder. “You will instruct your men to back out and follow our men to the Mound and make camp. There is a site that we have used before; it has plenty of water and grass. Your men will be quite comfortable. Your men will stay there under the command of one of your senior officers. The rest of the officers will be provided quarters and supplies while we discuss the situation.”

“Do those tanks have shells, really?” asked the General, putting his weapon away.

Zach just grinned.

The General’s driver, upon his instructions, pulled several colored flags from the back of the vehicle and began semaphoring down the line. Soon, men were walking to the General’s car. Apparently, the signal was for an officers’ conference. General March quickly explained the situation and ordered Captain Jordan to take charge of the men and make camp where Zach’s men indicated. The other six officers remained with the General.

It took over an hour for the column to vacate the canyon. Only then did the tanks in the valley create an opening. They passed over the ditch on the retractable bridge.

They were met by One Troop and escorted to the Guesthouse where TJ and his family lived before moving to Palo Duro. The Council had decided to leave it as quarters for visitors they didn't want in Mitchell, but were not relegated to the Mound.

The party dismounted and the General and his staff were escorted in. Benton presided over lunch, with Carl at the foot of the table. The conversation remained light until the meal was finished and after lunch refreshments were brought out. When the General admired the brandy, Benton made a gift of several bottles.

"We got it from a group of reavers we hung," stated Carl.

Carl outlined why they suspected that General March and company were not what they seemed. He mentioned the uniforms, the lack of answers and the rest of the points, which had made them suspicious.

Benton, having regained his composure now that he was among his own, said, "General, we suspect that there is no reconstituted United States government. We also suspect that you represent a new brand of reaver. The people we know are starting to band together and small groups of raiders have had to band together, also.

"We don't know what your crimes are. What you have done to the Fundamentalists or the Mahdists is between you and them. I imagine that you have committed depredations on the east coast. Neither does that concern us. What does concern us are your future movements. To be blunt, the Rockies and the west coast are closed to you. The Sioux, our allies, are to the north. We have allies all along the Front Range to the Gulf of Mexico.

“I don’t think that we could be allies. You want to own it all. You are one of the petty dictators that history seems to vomit up every decade or so. And you are right; a fight between us would result in a lot of casualties and little gain. The remnants of each group would be snapped up by our mutual enemies.

“Here’s the deal. You will head back east. At least to the other side of the Mississippi. Carve out an empire there, if you will. Step back over the line? We will fight. We have been able to loot our share of military bases, General. The tanks are not our only weapons,” he sat back and swirled the wine in his glass.

“Well, you have had your say. Now, I will have mine. You have us at a disadvantage, so we are forced to take your proposal. I will pull my men back across the Mississippi. But I warn you, gentlemen, we will be back. I do plan on creating an empire and I will be its king.

“History did not ‘vomit’ me up. It formed me for the task of reforming this land into its rightful place as the world power. The Mahdists are becoming weaker by the day. The Fundamentalists are scattered and dividing further all of the time. The New Africans are returning to their tribal ways and will soon be living in villages and practicing voodoo.

“I have heard about you from various persons who have come into my hands. You sounded like we could join forces and light the torch of civilization again. However, you have turned me down,” he raised his hands, palm out as a token of failure. “But you do so at your peril.”

He slammed his fist on the table, causing glasses and bottles to sway. “You will join us, or you will perish. It is as simple as that.”

Zach had entered the building at the end of the General’s tirade. He had sent for several experts to look at the General’s vehicle. They had inspected the collection unit on the hood and,

over the protest of the driver, had crawled over the engine. All the time Olsen Thompson, the electrician, had been drawing furiously and muttering under his breathe. Paschal Rodriguez, the physicist was discussing the finer points with John Singleton II. The mechanics, Peter Bond, Jerry Hogg and Tim Williams stood back, finally, and helped refine the drawings. Paschal shoved his hat to the back of his head and looked at Zach. “Amazing!” was all he said. He climbed back on his mount and galloped back to Mitchell to share his information with his colleagues.

“You are free to go, General,” said Zach. “I think lunch is over and we all a little tired of the Hitlerian rhetoric. Do not stray from the road and do not turn back. You will be followed and there will be sufficient force to stop you within beck and call.”

The General made a sardonic bow to the company and, followed by his staff, stalked out. His car spun around and roared out of sight through the canyon. Within an hour after arriving at this camp, the convoy was moving down the road towards the east.

Zach and Carl observed them from a distance. “Think we heard the last of them?” Carl asked to no one in particular.

“Not by a long shot, not by a long shot,” returned Zach. “I think we will regret being overruled. Benton should have let us wipe them out, regardless of the cost, but he is the commander-in-chief and we do have laws.”

The two rode back to town in silence.

Chapter 9

First Contact

Summer/Fall 2045

Well, the reavers have gone. I was trying to think of what was out of place and it finally came to me. Scared the heck out of Sarah when I sat up in bed in the middle of the night. After I calmed her down, I asked her, "Where were their women?" She saw what I was getting at immediately. "They have a camp somewhere." I asked the rangers who followed General March where they had their headquarters. Unfortunately, the troopers broke off when they crossed into the borderlands between the Mahdists and the Fundamentalists.

The winter cattle and sheep came in last week from Palo Duro. With these and the culls from Big Valley, we will have plenty of salt and smoked meat for the winter. With the hams and sausages we make from the pig farm, there will be a good variety. We have salvaged several more heavy-duty freezers from a store and we are looking for walk-ins from cold storage facilities we can dismantle and rebuild. These are pretty hard to find because the compressors have usually been destroyed by vandals, for some reason. A couple of the engineers are working on the problem. Luckily, we have the compressors from the secret facility, which helps.

Palo Duro is a big success. Not only have they secured the settlement area and established safe grazing ground for the cattle, sheep and llamas, but there are small farms and orchards spread along the river. They have some contact and trade with western Oklahoma. Several of these Oklahomans came in with the herd. They turn out to be Indians and I have arranged a meeting with the Sioux Confederation. With our luck, the little land we have will be claimed by one or the other. I hope that's a joke.

All seems to be quiet with our new friends, General March hasn't been heard from and the Mahdists are licking their wounds after an attack on New Africa. The Fundamentalists seem to be having an internal crisis. There has been a trickle of refugees, both white and black, talking about clashes in New Jerusalem. There have been a couple of incursions by the Aztecs, but they have been easily blocked. The Council is of the opinion that they are trying to maintain a border zone. That's as good a reason for the lack of serious activity from them as any.

Since there is some clearing in the atmosphere, we have set up a radio network with all of the valleys. Some days the reception is good, others not so good. It will be a godsend to be able to send messages through radio contact rather than riders or the destruction prone telephone system. We can't get Palo Duro, but there is a station north of us that the Sioux monitor on occasion. No one seems to know why communications have been so disrupted. I can see the satellites being out of whack, but radio was here well before Sputnik.

The crops are good, this year. There is a mill where we press our own vegetable oil. We have two vineyards, now and a couple of breweries. A distillery, motivated by 'Doc' has put out tolerable vodka and bourbon and they are trying to come up with a decent gin, though the first few batches were atrocious.

Eddie Loukachenets has set up a glass blowing operation and he has more customers than he knows what to do with. The women all have to have an original. He must have a thousand hours from the ladies of the settlements. All us old married men are jealous as to how the single ladies redeem their debt. There are rumors around that there will be a lot of little 'Eddies' running around next summer. He says that he can make forms for bottles and canning jars and set up a device, which blows hot glass into the molds. If he can do that, it will save a lot of scavenging time hunting for canning jars.

Cheese making is going well. We have enough milk cows and goats to provide the raw materials and our production has graduated to harder cheeses like blue, parmesan, Romano and cheddar.

Zach walked into the war room, dusting off his jeans with his rolled up gloves. He had just finished bringing in his culls to the slaughter grounds and a trooper found him there. Ed had requested his presence.

“What’s up, gentlemen?” he asked.

Ed, Hans and Stretch were studying a piece of paper and referencing a map of southern Texas. Ed replied, “We have a report that the radio station we sent to Palo Duro got something. William Daniels sent this to get our opinion. It was sent from Rio Grande.” With that he handed Zach the message.

It read, “Got transmission. Supposedly from Israelis. From boat off shore. Repeats every hour. Message in Hebrew. Wants to know if anyone is there. William Daniels”

“What’s down there? Is it empty or Fundamentalist or Aztec? Is this even a real message? Do you guys think that it could be a trap? I can’t see the Fundamentalists setting this up, but the Aztecs or General March?”

“Yeah, those are our questions, too,” said Hans.

“Do we want to send Rangers to investigate? How about a reply? William hasn’t done anything, but I am betting that the Jews are riding him to answer,” interjected Stretch.

“If William is smart, he wouldn’t want to tell them, but someone had to translate the Hebrew, if he understands the message being sent. I doubt that anyone is in the dark on this,” said Ed. “We need to know what is down there. We could send down another couple of radios and set up relay stations for messages from the coast.”

Zach looked at the map and measured distances. “If we put a radio in the Dallas/Fort Worth area and another in Houston area, we should be able to connect a line to the coast. That would require, what, two radios and a squad with each? We could send another troop down; I would hate to strip Palo Duro, in case it is a ruse.”

The four men stood in silence for a few minutes, looking over the map and the roster. Finally, Ed observed, “Carl is running Eleven Troop through its paces to Deseret. We don’t have many others the Council would trust with this, Zach. How about it?”

“Oh, no. Sarah would skin me. Do you know how touchy a pregnant woman can be? I promised her, last time, that I wouldn’t leave her again. I am, gentlemen, a homebody – h-o-m-e-b-o-d-y, homebody. No,” he held up his hands and backed towards the door.

“Zach.”

“No, Ed.”

“Zach,” Ed repeated, softly, as if talking to a small, excited child.

“What part of ‘no’ don’t you understand? NO, No, no.” Zach turned and started out the door.

“Zach, we already talked to Sarah.”

Zach whirled around. “When? I just left her an hour ago.”

“Three hours, Zach.”

“What?” he looked at his watch. “Okay. Three. When did you talk to her?”

“She was in town a half hour ago and we broached the subject,” said Ed, fighting to control his amusement. “She wasn’t too happy, but I promised that one of the new couples from New Jerusalem would take over the Smolleks place and help her and the children. He has worked with cattle and she is great with children. She has been working with Gail O’Malley.

Their name is Rondell, they have a couple of children the ages of yours and they can play together.”

“Well, she may have agreed to you clowns, but I am going to catch it when she gets me alone. I still say ‘no’.” With that he left the War Room and rode home feeling self-righteous.

When he reached the rise looking down on the ranch, there was a strange wagon in the yard. He sat at the head of the trail and thought about the Rondells. He finally decided that he needed the help and Sarah needed the company, even though he wasn’t going and rode to the house. Sarah watched him ride in, her eyes shaded with a shapely hand and the other resting on the slight bulge at her waist.

Riding up, he was again amazed at how well she took to child bearing. His first wife had hated the pregnancies. He suffered; maybe not as much as she did, but suffer he did when she delivered. Sarah reveled in the whole process, almost as if she liked being pregnant with the morning sickness, the back pain and everything else tied to it.

He couldn’t tell what she was thinking by the neutral look on her face. He mounted the steps and gave her a deep kiss and turned to meet the newcomers, who were exiting the Smollek’s old home. After introductions, he helped Steve Rondell move in the heavier furniture and the boxes, mattresses and other household goods.

Sarah had prepared a roast and they all sat down to dinner after everything had been moved in. Zach carved and passed out plates, waiting for someone to say something about his supposed travels, so he could disabuse them of the idea.

When nothing had been said, he decided to bring the subject up himself. “I stopped into the War Room today and they tried to interest me in an expedition to discover if a radio transmission was legit or not. I turned them down. Flat.

“Steve, don’t you think that a promise made to your wife is the most important thing you can do?” he asked his guest, pointing with his steak knife.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I suppose so. Honey, what do you think?”

“Stevie, if you promise me something small, there is a fifty-fifty chance you will forget it in five minutes, but something big; you have never let me down, yet,” Steve’s tall wife replied. She would never win any beauty contests, Zach thought, looking at Sarah, whose beauty was enhanced by her condition, but there was an attractive strength of character about her.

Sarah laughed and shook her head in amusement. “Maizey,” she said. “My husband here is sounding so self-sacrificing and proud of himself. Ed, Hans and Stretch already talked to me, Zach, and I said I don’t mind you going. Steve and Maizey will be here to see that I don’t get bored or that the wrong bull doesn’t mount the wrong cow, so you can go.”

“I am glad that Steve is here. I am glad that Maizey is here. I am even glad that the kids are here. But, I will also be here. I made you a promise. That’s all there is to it.”

The conversation turned to other topics and they had a pleasant evening. Both couples knew that a strong friendship had been started that night and, when the Rondells departed, they left a small sense of loss behind.

After Zach had carried the children to bed and was lying next to his wife with his arm around her, she murmured, “You know you are going and I packed your things. Good night.” She kissed him on the cheek and gently pressed her hand on his lips to forestall any argument.

Zach was miffed. Did Sarah want to get rid of him or was she sacrificing for him. While he was thinking about this, he went to sleep.

The next morning, he said good-bye to his wife and children; gave instructions to Steve and wished the Rondells well. He took the duffle bag Sarah had packed the day before, his

weapons and his kit and rode away. At the top of the rise, as was his custom when he left home for any reason, he turned and gazed at the tiny figures still gathered around the porch and wondered if he would see them again. He waved and rode down the road towards Mitchell.

Once in Mitchell, Ed and Hans showed no surprise at his change of mind. Apparently, they knew him and Sarah better than he did. Thirteen Troop, with John Wolf as captain, was ready. It was one of the youngest troops and had been kept near the home valley. Ed decided that it needed a little seasoning and the trip to Palo Duro would be a great training mission. A couple of older troopers had been added, Jimmy Williams, James Moss and William Asanti, to give the younger troopers someone with greater experience along and to give the three of them some leadership experience. They were in line to command the next Troops that were formed.

At the last minute Jimmy Pindar from Ten Troop decided to accompany the troop as far as Rio Grande. The Shorts had returned from their visit to the Sioux and decided to wait the few days until the expedition left and accompany it.

Zach and Jimmy had the troop ready for inspection two days later and they set out at ten o'clock. Several troopers, under James Moss, were assigned the point, while others under William Asanti formed the rear guard. They relied on a ranger detachment, which had set out several days earlier to scout to the east, to warn them of anything from that direction, but they still kept an eye out.

Zach pushed them hard the first day, with a ten-minute break every hour to rest the horses and a half-hour for midday and dinner. After dinner they pushed on for several more hours and made a dry camp after dark. The troopers were tired, but not exhausted, and in good spirits.

William Asanti played the practical jokes he was famous for. Though they irritated some of the troopers, they were taken good-naturedly. William's infectious grin, showing white teeth against his black skin and his immense size accounted for the lack of revenge.

Zach kept up the pace over the next few days and Jimmy Pindar would shout out commands to deploy without warning and time the change in formation. During several of the short breaks, the troopers would take target practice with the losing squad assigned to KP for the midday or evening meals.

The outriders saw nothing out of the ordinary during the journey and they entered Rio Grande tired and ready to wash off the trail dust. He gave them the rest of the day and the night to re-supply and rest. His announcement that they would leave early in the morning met with groans.

At dawn, the party set out. There were no drills on the second leg of the journey, though Zach drove them just as hard. They switched to the spare horses every hour and rode late into the night. Something he couldn't explain was driving Zach. He had a feeling that something was wrong.

When they reached the road the Shorts were to take to Oklahoma, they met a contingent of Oklahomans who had come to meet the travelers. Zach asked if they knew of anything important happening at Palo Duro Canyon, but the Cherokee were ignorant of anything out of the ordinary.

They shook hands all around and Zach, still worried, hurried along the southern road. Nand Sing of Seventeen Troop met them and led them to the Ranger's station and the headquarters building. Nand Singh hadn't reported anything amiss and Zach put his feelings down to worry.

William Daniels greeted them and Zach dismissed the Mitchell troop to the Palo Durans and followed William into his office. A small office in the visitor's center had been converted into an office/war room for the colony.

"Good to see you, Zach," William said. "To tell the truth, Samuel Steinman is driving me nuts."

The subject of their conversation at that moment interrupted them. He barged in trailing Carl Weisenfeld. The rabbi tried to apologize for the abrupt entry, but Samuel waved him to silence and demanded, "Zach, when are we going to meet the Israelis on the Gulf?"

"Hello to you, too, Samuel," Zach said with some asperity. "Let me get a briefing from Bill here and I'll let you know." He turned his attention to Carl and spoke in a more friendly tone, "Hello, Carl. How are things going?"

"Good to see you, as always, Zach, my boy." Carl put a hand on Samuel's arm to forestall another outburst. "We are doing well here. Now, these messages, Zach. They are in Hebrew. Who else would be speaking in Hebrew, I ask? William is worried, not a bad thing in these times, I admit, but a message in Hebrew."

"Look, Carl," William said in exasperation. "We've had this conversation before. It could be from a prisoner. It could be a renegade. We discussed this. You know that the Nazis used Jews to track down their own during the Second World War, so why not now? I don't want to strip the colony to see what is what." He looked to Zach for support.

Zach put a hand on Carl and Samuel's shoulders. "Carl. Samuel. I know what this means to you. Your people. You have waited for years for this moment. Wait a little more, huh?"

“Bill is right. Worst case, this is a message from reavers or the Aztecs. They wait for us to send out a large party and they attack. What would happen to Ruth and Rebecca? What about the kids and grandkids?

“If we sent out a small party? There is a possibility of an ambush, even if this message is real. You don’t have any way of maintaining communication. If there were trouble, how would you know? Be sensible. I have Thirteen Troop with me. We are going to set up a chain of radios from here to the coast. We will leave enough troops here for any surprises and my troop will take a couple of Hebrew speakers with us and head for the coast. If there is trouble, we can fall back to the middle radio and have enough troopers to mount a defense until the Palo Duro troops can bail us out.”

Even Samuel grudgingly acknowledged that the plan had merit and the two men left to select the men to accompany the troop to the coast.

“Whew. Thanks, Zach. Like I said, those two have been driving me to murder.” William mopped his forehead with a handkerchief and collapsed in his chair. “So, you brought two more radios?”

“Actually, three,” replied Zach, seating himself. “We didn’t want to have to worry about parts and repairs. From the looks of it, if one of the radios didn’t work, we would have to shoot Samuel,” he chuckled.

William called in a runner and asked him to let Jasper Poole know that Zach had arrived and they would meet him in the canteen. The two men walked across the street to the diner, where the rest of the Mitchell troop was eating and claimed a table from a group of them. By the time Zach had been brought up to speed on the situation at the Canyon, Jasper and Ishar Singh joined them.

“Sorry about the delay, but I wanted Ishar Singh to join us,” said Jasper as hands were shaken. They seated themselves and ordered from the trooper on duty. Zach laid out his plan and Ishar Singh took exception that his men wouldn’t be included in the plan. Zach agreed that one squad from Palo Duro and one from Thirteen Troop would make up the party.

“Good. And I will lead my men. Now, I suggest that the radio near Dallas be equipped with one of the machine guns. It would be most helpful if we had to fall back on that position,” Ishar Singh stated in a bass voice pitched to carry across a windy parade ground. Zach almost winced whenever he spoke.

At that moment Samuel and Carl, along with two younger men, entered and spotted the four after scanning the crowd. They hurried over and Zach muttered under his breath, “Don’t they ever just walk?” William snorted coffee onto his plate and gave Zach an exasperated look.

The four Israelis stopped at the table. Carl introduced the two younger men as Wade Gold and David Steinmann, who would be accompanying them to act as interpreters with the Israelis. They evicted the group around another table and dragged it and the chairs over and joined it to Zach’s table. When they had seated themselves, they went over the plan again for their benefit.

“Good, when do you leave?” asked Samuel.

“Samuel, I just got here. My men need a night’s rest and re-supply. We need to test the radios after the trip. Ishar Singh needs to get his men supplied and ready. We cannot leave before midday, tomorrow.

“Don’t irritate me, Samuel,” Zach snapped, as the man was about to protest.

Samuel, with anger in his eyes stood up, knocking his chair over. He marched out of the room, back rigid in fury.

“Please, Zach, my boy,” Carl said, trying to calm the angry waters, “he has waited years for this. He trekked from the coast of California to Mitchell and down to here. His dream has always been to join with the Israelis in Florida.”

Zach sighed and nodded, “I know, Carl. I am tired, old son. Tired and dirty. I am going to take a shower and find a bed and sleep. Excuse me, gentlemen.” He looked at Wade and David and said he was glad to meet them and left with the trooper William assigned to show him his quarters.

When Zach stepped out of the canteen after breakfast, he felt much better than last evening. He had a good night’s sleep, a hot shower and a good breakfast. He met with Nils Benton, the chief radioman. He reported that the radios were working perfectly. They had tried to communicate with Rio Grande, but there was no response. Zach wasn’t surprised and made a mental note to himself to look for a likely spot to set up a colony or ranger camp southeast of Pueblo. That would give them the last link in the chain of communications from Palo Duro to Mitchell.

As he exited the headquarters building, he spotted Samuel crossing the street in his direction. Zach sighed and met the man in the middle of the street. Thoughts of old Western gunfights came to mind as he apologized to Samuel for his short temper the prior evening. Samuel waved it off and reported that Wade and David were ready.

Zach knew what he was trying to say and assured him that the troops were finishing breakfast and would be assembling within fifteen minutes in the Visitors’ Center Parking Lot. “If we can avoid unnecessary speeches, we will be gone fifteen minutes after that.

Samuel nodded and headed away. Zach had looked for Wade and David at breakfast, but hadn't seen them. They had probably been in a strategy session with Carl and Samuel all night. He hoped they wouldn't be too tired to pull their own weight.

He was true to his word, twenty-eight minutes later the outriders had set out and the pack train followed, more slowly. As it headed southeast towards Dallas, the sun began to blaze.

"A fine day to travel, eh, Zach," exclaimed Ishar Sing,

Zach removed his hat and wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt and shot the Indian a sharp glance to see if he was joking. From the look of him, he wasn't. "Real nice day. We should get a fine case of sunstroke by early afternoon"

"Oh, you are a funny man, Zach," the Sikh boomed and laughed.

At the noon break; the scouts reported no movement other than a herd of pronghorns. They pushed on and reached Lake Kemp, near Seymour, Texas.

Other than coyotes and owls, there were no sounds. They reached a spot southeast of Dallas the next day. It was on a bluff overlooking the old city, which still showed signs of radiation on the monitors. Camp was made, the equipment tested and the defenses organized before the troopers were allowed to relax. Ishar Singh and his half troop were to man this post and monitor the radio. Thirteen Troop set out early the next morning, with David Steinmann and Wade Gold, towards the Houston area.

They arrived the second night out of the Dallas camp. They set up camp on the shores of Lake Conroe. Nils unpacked his equipment and began scanning the various bands. He finally picked up a transmission, but lost it. He chased it up and down the bandwidths until he found it again. "They are using a moving transmission," he told Zach. "I know this is the one, 'cause its in Hebrew." David, who was standing nearby, nodded.

“Can’t you pin it down?” asked Zach

“They transmit on one band, wait a few minutes, then change bands and transmit again. They won’t hold until someone responds, I guess.”

“Well, respond, then,” suggested Zach.

Nils handed the headset to David, adjusted the set and nodded. David waited for the message to finish and spoke Hebrew into the mic. The affects were instantaneous. A burst of Hebrew came back. David and the unknown operator on the other end kept up a flurry of conversation for the next five minutes.

Wade rushed in, an excited look on his face. “Old Samuel would be spitting on himself,” he muttered as he drank in the conversation.

Zach and the other troopers gathered waited impatiently for the conversation to end. Finally, David spoke a short reply into headset and removed it, putting it down on top of the radio. He and Wade looked at each other for a few seconds until Zach snapped, ‘Well!’

“Sorry, that was Commander Donat. He is in a ship off the Texas coast. He has been broadcasting for several months. They are looking for us, or, well, any Jews. He wants to meet us on the south end of the bay, near Sabine, Texas.

“I told him about you and Mitchell and that we would meet him tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night?” Zach asked. “Besides speaking Hebrew, how do you know that these guys are the real thing? Do you know this Commander personally? You go to his wedding or something?

“We are not rushing to the beach like the natives in a B-grade movie set in Fiji.” Zach paused and scratched his forehead in frustration. “All right. David, I know you are as excited as

your father. Heaven knows he would have shot out of here and headed for the beach immediately. Just for that reason, we didn't bring your father.

"Let me think a minute. Here's what we are going to do. Get back on the radio and tell the Israelis that we can't make it tomorrow. The day after will have to do.

"Tomorrow, William Asanti, Jimmy Williams, James Moss and Nils. You head for the coast to do a little reconnaissance. Take the extra radio with you. Scout the meeting area and report to me." Zach wanted to go, but he had to trust his future troop leaders.

"Get on the horn, David, and let them know the change in plans."

David took the headset and, when Nils gave the sign, began speaking in English. Zach's hand snapped out and shut off the set. David looked startled at the move and at Zach's expression.

"Hebrew, David, Hebrew. If someone else has a receiver, I would rather have them confused by the language than informed by the words," explained Zach and he turned the set back on.

David transmitted the message, in Hebrew this time. There appeared to be an argument, but David finally set the headset down and nodded to Zach.

"Good. Nils, James, Jimmy and William, stay with me. The rest of you can take off. Get some food and hit the sack, we could have a long day tomorrow."

He spent the next few hours going over a plan for the following three days with the four scouts. They used the topographical maps to pinpoint a location that overlooked the beach and provided safe escape routes, if they were necessary. By the time they turned in, the plan was as foolproof as possible, though, as usual, Zach worried that there was something they had forgotten.

Chapter 10

Face-to-Face Disaster

Summer/Fall 2045

Well, we made contact with them. Tomorrow we see if this is some elaborate trap or the real thing. I hate keeping things from David and Wade, but I don't know where their loyalties lie, really. If this is a trap and they don't catch on fast enough, they could give our defenses away and get everybody killed. If not, then they don't need to know anything about it.

I hope that it is not a trap, however. The Jewish families really want to get 'home'. Now that I have found one, I know how they feel. And it won't be a bad thing to get rid of Steinman, either.

The next morning, before dawn, the four scouts, with a packhorse carrying the radio and supplies for a week started out. After seeing them off, Zach turned to John Wolf and suggested that he widen the camp perimeter by a mile. When the troop leader had hurried off to carry out the suggestion, Zach entered the communications tent to find David and Wade sitting around, looking bored. Zach didn't want both of them to be assigned outside the camp, on guard, at the same time and, at least, one to be available to translate when needed.

He explained that he wanted them to set up a schedule that would have one of them available in the tent at all times, either sleeping or awake. He left them to settle the details with the radio operators, Micha Daniels and Wallace Chevski.

Later, he and John Wolf gathered to listen to the report of the scouts. They described the terrain on the beach and just back of it, where a small bluff, a half-mile away overlooked the

area. They had spotted a ship on the Gulf, but no one had landed. The beach was pristine, with no tracks. They didn't mention any locations, in case someone else was listening.

John told them to sit tight and make a cold camp. They would be contacted tomorrow morning with the finalized plan. Zach was concerned that the messages to his men would be intercepted, but decided that he couldn't do anything about it.

"Now," he said, "let's get the Israelis on the horn."

They contacted the ship on the predetermined frequency and set up the meeting for ten o'clock the next morning. Zach took John Wolf, Micha Daniels, Wallace Chevski and Carl Rosaia aside and explained their part of the plan. "Tomorrow, we are going to leave you in camp when we ride out. When we have had plenty of time to get out of eye- and ear-shot, you four are going to be our backup fire team. I don't want Wade or David to know about it because I'm not sure they won't resent it and give it away.

"John, you and Wallace will take the commander and any guards nearby. If things go south, take him out and then the guards on my rear or right. I'll try to upset things with any on my left.

"Micha, you and Carl will take out any sentries. Make your own call on targets.

"When you have settled your primary targets, John, you are to take anything to the right and Micha, you take anything to the left of my position. We will be keeping low and trying our best to stay out of your line of fire."

The main body of troopers set out in the first light of dawn. As soon as they were out of sight, John and the others on the sniper team packed the radio, ammunition and their rifles. They impatiently waited for an hour and set out for the bluff.

Zach deliberately rode at a leisurely pace to allow John time to set up before they met the Israelis. They finally reached the beach rendezvous and rode down to the surf's edge. A small ship was anchored offshore and, when the crew spotted the horsemen, they began lowering a boat. As it pulled from the ship, four men could be seen pulling on the oars, another was by the rudder as steersman and a sixth was stationed in the bow.

A small tarp was spread and Zach, flanked by David Steinman and Jimmy Williams, waited for the boat to land. Most of the rest of the squad was in a semicircle behind them. They all held weapons, but in a non-threatening manner. Wade and James were assigned as horse holders and guards to one side of the meeting.

The Israeli officer brought two men to the meeting area with him, leaving the other three by the boat. He was a young man with a burn-scar on his left arm. He sported a short, blond beard and a friendly smile. His companions were a small man who acted as the coxswain and a young, nervous youth. The older man had a barrel chest and had a deepwater tan and squint lines around his eyes, which never stopped moving. The youth shifted from foot to foot and appeared nervous. There was a period of hesitation, but after introduction, the parties sat and began their dialog. The rest of the troopers found what shade they could, stacked their weapons and relaxed.

"Commander Donat, you called this meeting, what's on your mind?" Zach asked when the amenities had been observed.

"Mr. Banducci," he began, but Zach interrupted. "Just Zach, if you don't mind."

"Okay, Zach then. Call me David. Zach, as you probably know, when the trouble started in Palestine, the Israeli government got permission to send non-combatants to Florida. We sent several shiploads of women, children and wounded and landed in the area near Destin. That area had been hard struck by the plague and the United States government cleared the few remaining

citizens from the settlement area. Later, the remnants of the Israelis managed to get to Tel Aviv, board other ships and joined their fellows. Altogether, we managed to save thirty thousand out of the several millions in Israel.

“The population has grown, since then. Some from natural increase, some from others finding and joining us. There have been two factions in the government, lately. One wants to create a new state in Florida, the other wants to move someplace of our own.”

Zach queried, “You mean going back to the Middle East?”

With a sad shake of his head, David replied, “No. That is out of our reach. Now and in the foreseeable future. This other faction wants to take over an island in the Caribbean, say Cuba or Hispaniola. Their thinking is that Florida will one day be part of the U.S. again and we will be strangers in a strange land, once more.”

“Won’t the Cubans or whoever, be a little upset about your moving in to the neighborhood?” asked Zach.

“Haiti and the Dominican Republic wouldn’t be my first choice, between you and me. Cuba, however, is a possibility. When Generalissimo Fidel Sanchez came to power, he was pretty bloodthirsty. What with disease, political murders and starvation he was well on his way to eliminating a large part of the Cuban population, like Stalin in the 1930s. When the bombs went off and the Cubans overran Guantanamo Bay, they left the bodies of the dead unburied.”

Zach nodded, “Yeah, the plague.”

“The plague and the radiation sickness from the clouds from the Tampa and New Orleans bombs. Most of the twelve million were dead and the rest fled to the Mexican coast. We have had scientists travel to the island. The radiation levels are negligible on the southern half of the island and manageable on the northern half. The island is virtually uninhabited.

“We are now preparing for the move. We have a dozen ships like this trying to find any Jews who want to join us.”

“Then the man you want to talk to is David. He is here representing the Jews from our group. There are a half a dozen families who are anxious to join you.”

The two Davids spoke for a few minutes in Hebrew. David Muller turned to Zach and said, “Mr. Steinmann says that the families are nearby?”

“A week away.”

“He also says that they have possessions.”

“Horses, household goods, tools, personal items, that sort of thing. Roughly a small wagon per family.”

Muller rubbed his chin and conferred with the coxswain. He finally turned back to Zach and commented. “We don’t have room on the ship for that kind of load. Would it be possible for them to drive overland? The gentiles are sparse, in the south, aren’t they?”

Zach replied, “I suppose they could do it, but it is a long way and we have no idea what the attitude of the Fundamentalists, your Gentiles, is. We had a man go through there a year or so ago, but a lot of things could have changed in the interim.

“Personally, I wouldn’t want to try it without assurances from the locals or a very strong force. Couldn’t you pick them up here, before you headed for Cuba? You will need a lot of ships for forty thousand people, or however many you have.”

Before David Muller could answer, a hole appeared in his forehead. He fell over, backward, and lay with arms spread. A stunned silence followed. Zach thought that one of his snipers had fired and he twisted around. He saw a line of men coming over the dunes and he reached for his rifle. He was stopped by a shot fired by the point man.

“Hold it. Everybody freeze,” he shouted, firing again.

Slowly, Zach pulled his hand from his weapon and raised his arms, which signaled his men to do the same. The sailors by the boat started to launch the craft, but, when one of them was shot, the rest raised their hands.

The newcomers quickly disarmed the Israelis and Zach’s men and herded them to the side. Two machine guns were positioned on the beach, both with a crew of three. The whole operation took no more than a couple of minutes. The surprise was complete.

Zach was brought before the leader of the attackers, a guard on each side. The skinny, redheaded man swung his weapon threateningly in his hand. He wore a camouflage jacket and pants, a black T-shirt with a garish picture of the devil and a band’s name and red tennis shoes.

“Where is your settlement?” he asked with no preamble.

“North,” said Zach, tersely.

The gun whipped around and the sight split open Zach’s cheek, cascading blood. Zach lay stunned for a second and rose to one knee. He laid his left arm across his knee and leaned his forehead on his arm as if in pain. He let the sand he had picked up in his left hand run through his fingers to give wind direction and force to his snipers.

“Stand up, you...” the lanky redhead started, but he was thrown backward by the sniper’s bullet. Zach immediately flung himself against the legs of the left guard, reaching for the .38 stuck in the small of his back behind his shirt. The reavers hadn’t even check for a hide-out gun. He jammed the gun under the chin of the guard and fired twice. He immediately rolled to his left and swung the gun at the other guard, but he was already down. He fired three shots at a sentry at the top of a sand dune. He came close enough to make the guard flinch and drop behind the

dune, in full sight of the snipers' nest. Zach heard a faint thump and knew that the snipers had gotten him.

He sprang to his feet and snatched up the automatic dropped by the leader of the gang and checked the safety. It was off and he pointed the gun in the direction of the beach and the machine guns, but both crews were down. A glance showed him that the prisoners had made the guards prisoners themselves.

Zach sprinted towards the horses and met two men backing towards him, covered by Wade. "James is hit," he said. After checking on James and finding that the bullet had passed through his thigh, Zach returned to where Wade was waiting by the horses. Zach calmly raised the automatic and shot both prisoners. He turned and stalked towards the other prisoners and shoved his way through the circle of guards.

He and Wade helped James to the where the medic was bandaging Donat's arm.

There were four raiders standing with their arms raised. Zach's troopers knew what was coming next and watched the Israelis as much as the raiders.

Zach pointed the gun at the first man in line. "Where are the rest of you?"

"Up yours," sneered the man with a scruffy beard and gloves with the fingers cut off.

Zach shot him in the face and swung the gun at the second man.

"Same question," he snapped.

The raider, in his late teens, with long hair and yellow teeth, stuttered and pointed east.

"How far?"

"FIVE MILES," he yelled in a panic.

"How many?"

"Uh, Huh?"

Zach shot him and pointed the gun at the third raider who had tears running down his cheeks.

“Don’t shoot me, mister,” he begged and a damp stain appeared on his dirty jeans.

“SAME QUESTION,” Zach shouted.

“Fifteen, twenty,” the man babbled.

“HOW MANY,” and Zach cocked the gun.

“Close to twenty,” he whimpered. “And eleven skags.” Skags was the reaver slang for sex slaves. These girls were used until they wore out and then were killed. Zach almost tightened his finger on the trigger, his wife Sarah, had been a skag when they rescued her and several other women in Rawlins.

Zach took a deep breath and let the hammer down on the gun and turned away to face the coxswain. The man nodded his bullet head and ordered his remaining men down to the beach. The Israelis suffered two dead and several minor wounds. They carried the man killed at the prisoner sight and laid him and the other in the boat, along with David Muller.

The boat was pulling to the ship when John and the rest of the sniper team galloped into camp. Zach met them by the tarp-covered body of Nils Benton.

“What happened?” he asked.

John looked abashed. “I was looking at the meeting and Micha was watching the guys by the boat. The spotters were looking at secondary targets. We didn’t even think about anyone else being around. We’re sorry, Zach, really we are,” he said in an anguished voice.

“All right,” Zach said, waving a hand. “Don’t worry about it. I probably would have done the same thing, myself. It was my fault that I didn’t make things clearer or put out sentries, myself.

“You did good work with the raiders. Excellent shooting. You saved a lot of lives. Thanks,” he finished. “Set sentries, will you, John?”

“Micha, warm up the radio and get me the ship.”

He looked around for something he missed and sat on the sand until the call had been made. When Micha nodded, Zach took the headset. He spoke with the captain, who had a thick accent. Zach informed him that they were going after the reaver camp and would meet them in two days to continue their discussion.

The captain, after several repetitions, made it clear that they were joining Zach. An hour later they landed a party of eight men, including the coxswain who grinned at Zach and gave him the thumbs up.

They decided to walk, since there weren't enough horses for the whole party. They left Wade and one of the sailors to guard the mounts.

Within a mile, they found the motorcycles and sand buggies of the raiders. The group passed the equipment and trudged on. When they had gone five miles, Zach dropped back by the prisoners and started fingering his gun. The raiders started sweating and the younger one looked like he was going to start crying.

Just as Zach had made up his mind that the raider had lied to him, a soft cry from the point sounded. Zach hurried up and found William at the crest of a dune overlooking a small fishing village. There were rotting nets on drying poles, a couple of fishing smacks pulled up on the beach and a sagging dock. Buildings straggled up a single, twisty street. There were several men sitting or standing in front of what could have been the local bar/store. The sun was shining behind Zach and he slithered down the slope to talk with the Israeli Lieutenant and John.

“It is going to be dark in about a half hour,” Zach said. “There are some tall bushes around the town and some straggly pines on the east side. Jacob,” he addressed the Israeli, “take your men and Jimmy Williams, here, and be on that side of town in fifteen minutes. That’s when we hit them.

“I’m going to take my men and just walk in. Either discipline is so lax that we won’t be noticed or it will draw all of their attention to us. If we’re not spotted, we will fire first, if we are, then when I raise my hand and wave, you start shooting. There’s twenty of them, so don’t stop.

“Excuse me, sir,” politely noted the Israeli, “that doesn’t seem much of a plan.”

“No, its not,” said Zach, ruefully. “But it’s all I can think of at a moments notice. We don’t have a lot of latitude. There are too many buildings to just start shooting, because of the captives.”

The Lieutenant shrugged and nodded. He set off with his men and Jimmy and they soon faded into the dusk. Zach had each man check his rifle and ammunition. They had each picked up extra handguns from the reavers and filled pockets with ammunition for them.

They stripped and hog-tied the prisoners in such a way that by struggling, they would strangle themselves. When Wallace had finished tying them, they sat facing each other with gags shoved in their mouths. They were uncomfortable, but secure.

Zach reflected, for the umpteenth time, that the waiting before a fight was the hardest part. The hands of his watch crawled around, but finally the fifteen minutes had passed

Carl Rosaia and David Steinmann had dressed in the reavers’ clothes, though Carl had protested at putting on the pungent, soiled pants. They led the other troopers as they walked

towards the town. They met a boy of fifteen relieving himself behind a shack. William cut his throat before the drunk knew they were there.

“One,” Zach mouthed to himself.

They split and moved around the structure and Zach took a quick count. There were four reavers standing in front of the bar, from which drunken sounds were pouring. Two of the shacks had lights and Zach nodded to John to take one and William to take the other. Their pistols were equipped with homemade silencers, as were most of the other handguns from Mitchell.

As they approached the bar, one of the men took a swig from a bottle and grinned at Carl, “Hey, Billy. When did you bastards get back?”

Zach muttered, “Go!”

Six guns spat and the four dropped. Wallace shot each again, in the head to make sure.

“Five,” Zach said to himself.

The Israeli force filtered through the town and joined them in front of the bar.

“Take your men and cover the back and sides. Leave Jimmy here, with us. We are going in and shoot as many as we can with silencers before they realize what is going on. You make sure that none get away, but be careful, the walls are flimsy and your shots will go right through them,” whispered Zach.

As the Israelis fanned out on both sides of the building, Zach’s men reloaded and, with Zach leading, they stepped into the building. It was one large room, with a bar on the left and shelves for canned and dry goods on the right. A makeshift stage had been set up at one end and four frightened women were doing a strip tease for the audience. Several other women were

being mauled at the tables. The catcalls and whistles drowned out any sound Zach and his men were making.

William and Jimmy stepped through the door and shot the bartender and a man standing at the end of the bar. They advanced into the room and spread out, the rest following suit.

“Seven,” Zach mouthed.

Zach shot the man sitting at the table in front of him and swung the gun onto his partner and finished him, too.

“Nine,” Zach counted.

As the squad formed a line at the back of the room, someone noticed them and shouted a welcome. It was drowned in blood at a shot tore open the man’s throat. Several more reavers went down before the fact that they were being attacked worked its way through their alcohol soaked brains. Two jumped through nearby windows and the rest fell to the troopers’ guns. There was the bark of carbines from outside.

Two men tried to surrender, but Zach wasn’t taking prisoners. A man leaped to the stage and threatened one of the women with a knife. “Micha!” roared Zach pointing to the stage. Micha raised his gun in one smooth motion and shot the man in the forehead. He collapsed on the stage and the woman stood rigid with her eyes shut.

A shot from the corner roared in the confined space and five spits answered it and the gray-haired reaver was slammed against the wall. “Everyone down,” yelled Zach and the troopers fanned out to search the room for living reavers. The two that were found were quickly put out of their misery.

The Israelis stormed through windows and doors, weapons at the ready. They looked at the carnage and then at Zach and his men. The Lieutenant saluted.

Zach ordered Micha and Jimmy to find John and William. They soon returned to report that three other reavers had been killed. With the dead in the saloon and in the street, they numbered twenty-one.

A voice piped up, "Can we get up, now?"

"What? Oh, yeah," Zach said. He tore the soiled tablecloth off a nearby table and covered the near naked body. Of the eleven women, nine were alive. One had died in the shooting and the other had died that afternoon at the hands of the leader of the reavers when she scratched him after a serious indignity. The last shot from the grey-haired man had killed James Moss. His body was laid out, wrapped in a sheet.

The Israelis made a hasty, but thorough search of the town and brought in the prisoners. In light of the disapproval he encountered from some of the Israelis on the beach, Zach presented them to the young Lieutenant.

Food was prepared and they slept that night, the women taking the shacks and the men not on guard duty, sleeping in the open. Guards were changed every two hours.

The next morning, the ship sailed to the dock and its captain was introduced to the troopers. Breakfast was served in the bar, after the bodies had been removed and sand spread over the bloodstains. The ship's slop chest was opened and the women appeared in a variety of garb, which would have been amusing except for the circumstances. Troopers and sailors were assigned the tasks of cooks and waiters and Zach and the Lieutenant told the story of the previous night's fight.

The ship's captain was delicate when he asked the women their story. It was a tale of murder and degradation. One of the women, a girl of eighteen, was Jewish and begged to be

able to return with the ship. The captain dried her tears and said, "Of course. You will be welcomed."

The rest didn't know what they would do. Their homes had been burned and their families slaughtered. Zach proposed that they return with the Jeffersonians and, either settle amongst them or they would try and find their families, through diplomatic channels, if they could. The remaining eight agreed

After breakfast, Zach, John, Jimmy and William sat down with the captain to continue the previous discussion, interrupted on the beach. The half-dozen Jewish families in the Palo Duro settlement would be welcome. The captain would return to Tampa and bring the matter up with the council. He agreed that trekking across the country presented too many difficulties and was unfeasible. They would return to this portion of the coast in a month with the decision.

The Israelis and Troopers looted the town. The two prisoners were executed on the order of the captain and the bodies of all of the reavers were stacked in the bar/store and the buildings were burned. A sign warning of the reavers' fate was painted and set at the edge of the ruins.

Several troopers had sailed up the coast to where the remuda had been left and returned with the horses. The goods were divided and the Israelis and Rebecca sailed eastward. John mounted the troops and they carried James back to where they had buried Nils. James was laid to rest and the troop radioed to the Sikhs.

They returned to Palo Duro several days later. The Jewish settlers were overjoyed at the success of the meeting and impatient for the month to pass. Zach and Thirteen Troop rested for several days, renewing friendships. They left at dawn and reached Mitchell two weeks later.

Chapter 11

Pleas for Help

Fall 2045

The meeting with the Israelis was pretty interesting. Their plan to take over Cuba is fairly bold. It will be interesting to see if they can pull it off. I suppose it all depends on how much, if any, resistance they encounter. I hope they read a history of the Spanish-American War.

It looks like the women will be staying in Mitchell. Sarah is being a mother hen to them, but I suppose it is her own experience that brings it out in her. Speaking of staying, we are still getting a trickle of people coming in from the East. I would say that the Fundamentalists are having a ton of fun with Pastor Simmons in charge.

I had a discussion with Ed. He is of the conclusion that we are breaking up into tribes again. Some religious, others racial. He remarked that the west coast remnants, those who are most dedicated to restoring the U.S. and we are the exceptions. We pretty much accept anyone, though we draw the line at Muslims. He calls that Islamophobic, but I point out that the last fifty years were marked with wars in which one or both sides were Muslim. I have no problem with any religion as long as they don't try to shove it down my throat. The Mahdists do it because they interpret the Koran as telling them to do so, while the Fundamentalists do it because they are nuts.

Anyway, the harvest was the best in years. The wheat, barley and corn, finally, all came in with healthy yields. Our resident brewers are happy about that, not having to share the barley

with the bakers. The vegetables and fruit flourished. Even the Rosaia and Chevski vineyards have bumper crops. Knowing the two families, there will be a hot contest to see who makes the best wine.

There are plenty of cheeses put away. The Cougar Caves have turned out to be a perfect aging location for the cheese and we have pretty much turned it over to them. A new location had to be found for the emergency cache of supplies, but it was worth the work after tasting the cheese.

The slaughter and processing is going well. We have all the salt we need from Deseret and they are always in the market for skins for their leather works. A Mormon saddle is worth its weight in gold (not that gold is worth much, now-a-days).

Our 'brain trust' has come up with a lot of useful ideas, from fertilizer to power to insecticides to gunpowder. They think they can duplicate the solar engine from General March, in a few more months. With that and the teaching of our young men and women, they are pretty busy. The Palo Duro settlement has been trying to recruit for a school they want to start down there.

The lumber and coal mining operations are going well. There are three mills set up for making and drying lumber and there is plenty of coal for the winter's heating. Every house has a coal fired stove, thanks to the efforts of the blacksmiths, Charlie Wright, Harvard O'Callaghan and Tevye Smolensk.

We have a factory refurbishing solar panels and trading them outside Jefferson. The push for alternative energies created a huge demand just before the collapse, so there are plenty of them around, but few who can work on them. Luckily, we have two of the best solar engineers around (maybe, the only two.)

Baseball, not one of my favorite sports, has really caught on. We have had several tournaments between the settlements and the competition has been fierce. Soccer is a close second and there are even a few rugby teams. I hear that the Sikhs are trying to teach the rest of the settlers how to play cricket.

The reavers are getting to be a bigger and bigger problem. They have left us alone, but there is a lot of smoke and ruined homesteads to the East. Our scouts have run across a lot of the destruction and have saved a few refugees. They talk of young men and women, boys and girls being taken; herds run off and food and goods taken. I suspect that they have finally set up a central location where they trade, rest and refurbish. I wonder if General March is part of this. It has his grandiose signature.

An emergency council meeting was called during the busiest part of the harvest season. Zach grouched about being pulled away. He made his attitude clear as he took his place at the chamber's table.

The governor gaveled for order and said, "We have several guests down at the Guest Ranch. They have come to ask our help against New Jerusalem."

This created a buzz of conversation from the Council members until the gavel brought them back to order.

"I don't know the full story, but I would suggest that we summon them and find out. Everyone in agreement, say "Aye".

A chorus of "Aye" was heard and Benton Robison nodded to Zach, the Sergeant-at-Arms, who dispatched a rider to fetch the men. Meanwhile, the discussion turned to the harvest while the Council waited.

The men entered the chambers an hour later. The leader was a small man with enormous ears and a jutting nose. Zach was reminded of Punch from the old Punch and Judy shows. The man behind him was remarkable only in that he was black. Other than that he was of average height, average build and average looks. The third man was older and walked with a limp, as if his left knee was stiff.

“Sit down, gentlemen,” the Benton said, indicating the front row of the public seating. “I want you to explain your situation to the rest of the Council, yourselves.”

The older man stood. “Well, there’s not much to tell, really. We are from northwest Kansas, above old Dodge City around Rexford, Selden, Dresden and Hoxie.”

He pointed to himself and introduced himself as Gregory Bronski, the black man as Ed Black and the short man as Willy Potter.

“There are about two hundred families in our area, mostly farmers and ranchers, of course. We have been having trouble from the, what you call, reavers. We have our own militia and we have been able to keep them in check, mostly,” he continued after the introductions.

“Oh, they would hit a farm or ranch and we would respond to the signal fire or smoke. Before, we would track them down and take care of it, but they are going around in bigger bands. We figure the group that hit the Robinson’s place was a couple of hundred, more or less.

“Well,” he continued, giving his nose a savage rub and pulling at his ear, “we asked New Jerusalem for help. They were supposed to help us, you know.

“All they did was conscript half of the militia to fight the Mahdists. We didn’t send them and the next month we got a visit from the Guardian Angels.”

“Who?” queried Zach.

“The Guardian Angels,” Gregory repeated. “They are kind of the, well, the ones who enforce the rules, sort of.”

Ed Black spat out, “They’re goons. Simmons sends them as enforcers. I tried to reason with them, but the leader, he backhanded me like I was a noisy dog.”

Willy patted the angry man on the back in sympathy and tugged him back into his chair, muttering soothing sounds.

“Yeah, they were a little rough. Michael, the leader, they only have one name, like, said that we were in the middle of a holy war and the militia was needed. We still haven’t sent them, saying that they were needed for the harvest. But, as soon as the harvest is done, New Jerusalem expects them to show up.”

“You have our sympathy, I’m sure, but what do you want from us?” asked Edward Van Zee.

“Well, we thought you could help us. I don’t know, send some troops or something. Pastor Simmons is afraid of you guys. We could join you, you know, join Jefferson.”

Zach looked around at the rest of the Council before he spoke, “Gregory, Willy, Ed. You don’t know what you are asking. We figure there are still 200-300 thousand people in New Jerusalem, spread from Kansas to Georgia, Texas to Virginia. That makes about twenty thousand soldiers. More than half of that is local militia, doing protection duty against the Reavers and other raiders. A couple of thousand are on the Florida border watching the Israelis. Another five hundred secret police, these Guardian Angels. The rest are along the northern border watching or fighting the Mahdists. There isn’t a lot to send against you guys, what, maybe, a thousand?”

“We only have hundred and seventy-nine in the militia. We could muster another two hundred, at most. But that would leave our families defenseless. If you could send a couple of thousand, we would feed them, you wouldn’t need supplies.”

“A couple of thousand!?! We could barely manage to muster that many using everybody in Jefferson. I don’t think you know much about us. The only reason we are able to survive here are the mountains. We have a great defensible position. Our enemies, so far, haven’t been the sharpest tools in the drawer, either.

“Out there in your neck of the woods, we would be sitting ducks. Even with the tanks, which don’t have a lot of fuel, we might not be able to beat them. Even if we did, Simmons would send a bigger force and bury us. From what I remember of the area, there are no defensible positions.”

“Then, what can we do?” demanded Willy. “Just what would you suggest?”

“What I would suggest is that you pack up and move. Harvest what you can, pack up everything that’s not nailed down and move,” Zach returned.

There was a stunned silence in the room. Zach had offered the solution that the supplicants didn’t want to hear.

Ed Black rose. “Move where? South and East wouldn’t solve anything. North is the Mahdists. We heard the Indians claim everything to the northeast. West, well, that’s you.”

“West in Gunnison is an old reservoir and a couple of small towns that are empty. The land is flat, there are trees in the mountains, and the land can support crops and herds. Most importantly, it is defensible. You could resettle there and join us.”

“Why haven’t you settled it, if it is so great?” asked Ed belligerently.

“We don’t have enough people,” Zach answered. “A place like that would take a large group of settlers. It is too big for a small group to defend. Two hundred families would make a sizable group and there is the Rio Grande Settlement and the Eagle Settlement near enough to keep close contact and supply support.”

“You’re serious?” asked Gregory.

“Yes, we’re serious,” replied Ed Van Zee. “Man, you are slowly getting wiped out. A farm here and a ranch there. I’ll bet that you had three hundred families five years ago, didn’t you.”

“Closer to three hundred fifty,” replied Ed Black. “What about New Africa?”

Zach looked puzzled. “What about it?”

“Could I go there?”

“Ed, you can go anywhere you want. We have a treaty with the Sioux Confederation. As long as New Africa hasn’t done anything to them, they will give safe passage to anyone who wants to go there.

“You will remember, though, that the Mahdists and New Africa are generally at war. Sometimes it heats up and sometimes just simmers, but there are always raids going on. Go if you want, but I don’t think you will be better off there than where you are.”

Gregory waved his hands as if clearing smoke from the air, “Let’s get back to the other thing. This Gunnison thing. We can discuss who goes where later, Ed.

“How much would you want for this place?”

Robison looked exasperated. “How much have you got? How about a billion dollars. I’m sure you could open a few banks and come up with that. Then we would have all the fire starting paper we would ever need.”

“Old son,” said Zach, shaking his head. “You haven’t understood a word, have you? Everyone who joins us is expected to work hard for themselves and the community, raising food, building, mining, cutting firewood, weaving, whatever. The young men and women, starting at sixteen, fifteen, if they want, defend the state and communities.

“You would be another link in the chain to Palo Duro Canyon. You would be the claim to more territory for the New United States. Don’t believe it would be easy. You would have to build homes, if the ones there are unsuitable. Repair roads, bridges, what needs it. There are reavers and Aztecs come up from Mexico on a regular basis. There may be other danger, who knows. Take the offer or don’t, but don’t insult us about it.”

Willy tugged Gregory and Ed into a whispered conference and the Council sat patiently waiting. After a few minutes, Willy stood and said, “Thanks for the offer. We’ll, we’ll discuss it tonight amongst ourselves and bring it to ours to discuss. I think it’s a good idea.

“If only some of us want to leave, is there room for a few families, anywhere?”

“Sure,” said Benton, “we’re always looking for solid people to join us. With the new colony at Palo Duro, there’s room. There are smaller valleys to settle, too. Don’t you worry about room, okay?”

The three men thanked the Council and left, excitedly discussing their future.

Zach leaned back in his chair and observed, “If Simmons is starting to get too authoritarian, we may have a flood of refugees, pretty soon.”

Ed Van Zee mused, “Or we are going to have to go to war with New Jerusalem. I really don’t want that. Their constant war with the Mahdists keeps them out of our hair and their numbers thinned down a bit.”

That last comment earned him a stern look from Gail O'Malley and the meeting broke up.

Zach and Sarah discussed it with the Rondells during dinner that night. Maizey was worried about the thought of war, but Steve contemplated a move to the Gunnison area and their own place. Zach shot a look at Sarah as if to say, "There goes another good helper."

Sarah expressed sympathy for the affected families and anger at the continual conflict when the efforts of everyone should be turned to creating a stable world.

They spent the rest of the evening solving the ills of the world and finally Steve began to yawn. They said good night and Zach helped Sarah clean up.

"What do you think will really happen, Zach?"

"Like I said, dear, the families will come or not, we will create a new settlement or not. Nothing much will change for us either way, unless Steve and Maizey pack up and leave. Then we will have to find another helper for you, so I can go trailing off on another adventure."

"Hah, the next adventure, mister mom, will happen to me. You can stay home, change diapers and tame your pack of wild men, so there," Sarah retorted and stuck her tongue out at him.

Zach laughed and grabbed her in a bear hug and swung her around until she screamed, protesting about being abused in her present condition. Zach hastily put her down and anxiously inquired about her health, offering to get the doctor or a midwife. Sarah laughed and said, "After all these years, I still get you with that one."

The next few weeks were hectic. The hay and grains had to be harvested before the rains came. The last of the pigs, beef and sheep slaughtered and preserved. The vegetables had to be canned or packed to freeze or dry. By the time the last of the harvest was in, the townspeople

were ready to celebrate a successful season. Teams had gone out to help the other settlements with their harvest and the party was held at a new community center at the edge of town. The building was used for concerts, dances, plays and community events, which couldn't fit into the town hall.

Fourteen Troop was assigned to guard duty for this year and the usual complaining was heard from the troopers. As it was the ancient right of soldiers to complain, no one called them on it. Zach, Carl and Ed split the rounds for the night.

The celebration started with a new play from Cosimo Zelazny. It was a comedy roughly based on Shakespeare's 'The Taming of the Shrew'. The showing was well received. The dance began shortly after the box supper. Over the years, thousands of pieces of sheet music had been rescued. Grace O'Malley had put together a band that had both talent and enthusiasm and everything from square dances to waltzes were soon calling the couples to the dance floor.

Around midnight, a trooper took Ed aside and reported visitors at the Front Door. Ed gathered Zach, Carl, Hans, Jimmy and Seth and they set out to meet the strangers. Ed explained that they were from New Africa and had been escorted by Sioux.

There were twenty men waiting at the Front Door. The leader was Jacob Jones and his lieutenant was a carbon copy of Michael Turner, named Sam Kestrel. He had the same sullen expression and manner as Michael had when he was a prisoner. The other eighteen were veterans of the Mahdist Wars and carried themselves with the air of warriors.

They greeted Jacob with pleasure and escorted Sam and him to the Guest Ranch. The other eighteen were shown where to camp at the foot of the Mound. There was a protest at this from Sam, but Jacob overruled him.

Ed ordered food to be brought from the harvest celebration and the men made small talk until it came and the guests had eaten.

“Well, I suppose its time,” observed Zach. “What brings you all the way down here?”

“We are at war,” Jacob began, “and we are losing.”

“We are not!” shouted Sam, jumping to his feet and knocking over his chair.

“Sit down,” demanded Jacob in a voice that brooked no compromise, his eyes blazing.

“If you cannot maintain your self-discipline you may join the others. Now, SIT DOWN.”

When Sam had righted his chair and reseated himself, Jacob continued, “The Mahdists have several new commanders. Unfortunately, they are more able than the fools that led us here. One, they call the Lion of Islam, has defeated our eastern forces and pushed us out of the Milwaukee area to just South of Green Bay and west to Madison. In effect, he has split us in two. We are desperate for arms and ammunition. Michael Turner, you remember him, has taken control and he isn’t half the man he replaced.”

Sam started to say something, but settled into a stormy silence, chewing on his thumbnail.

“General Flack was wounded and Michael took that as an excuse to replace him. Since then, we have suffered a series of defeats. The result of this was that we lost several depots with weapons and supplies.

“We are in a desperate situation with winter coming on. Without help we are doomed to fall.”

Zach thought, “Crap, now we have another group thinking we are the cavalry.”

“What do you expect us to do?” asked Ed.

“We expect you to help us. This is you fault!” said Sam in a hiss.

“Whoa, old son,” began Zach until Sam snarled at him, “I’m not your son, old man.”

“Yeah, but you are somebody’s son and raised without manners, apparently,” challenged Zach, tired of the young man’s attitude. “Don’t let your alligator mouth overshoot your parakeet brain. You came here asking for our help, remember.”

“Zach, please,” pleaded Jacob.

“All right, for you, Jacob, for you,” said Zach. Calmly he asked Sam, “Just how is it our fault?”

“You sent Michael and the rest back to Chicago with no weapons, that’s how.”

“From what I remember, we gave you arms. Isn’t that right, Jacob?”

“That is not the official story, unfortunately. Michael has always said that if you had given us better weapons and more ammunition, we could have defeated the Mahdists.” Shooting a stern look at Sam, he continued, “however, we have been at war with the Mahdists for years and this accusation keeps cropping up. We threw them out, when they were attending to the Fundamentalists. They made peace with them and wasted several battalions on us, piecemeal, through inefficiency and stupidity. We took plenty of weapons and ammunition off their dead, during those years, didn’t we, Sam?”

“This new lot are better trained, better led and better armed than any before. This Lion of Islam is shrewd and we were overconfident. They threw us out of South Chicago and we never recovered.

“With the loss of the depots we are now using rocks against bullets. With winter coming on, the fighting has paused. The Mahdists have consolidated their gains and we have managed to stop them. In the Spring, they will come again and it will be all over.”

“What do you want from us, Jacob?” Hans asked.

“Weapons, ammunition, men.” He paused. “The tanks.” His words created a silence. After a pause, he continued, “We would use them the same way you did. We would lead them into a trap and slaughter them”

“And if they detect the trap?” asked Jimmy.

“Then we lose anyway.”

“Do you know how important those tanks are to our defenses?” gently asked Ed.

“Yes,” was his only reply.

“Will you sleep here tonight? We will discuss this and see you tomorrow.” Ed rose and gripped Jacob’s shoulder and left. He assigned two troopers to unobtrusively watch the house and doubled the guard on the Front Door and Back Gate.

The men gathered in the War Room, the celebration forgotten. No one spoke for several minutes as they all tried to think of a way to help. Finally, after a few minutes, Ed took down the clipboard, which contained the military inventory. It showed that the arms depot had some surplus rifles; fifty-caliber machine guns; machine pistols; grenades, rocket launchers, eighty-eight field guns and ammunition.

“We can part with some M25s, a machine gun or two, a hundred grenades and some rocket launchers and twenty rockets and one of the field guns and fifty shells.”

“Ed, what will that give an incompetent general?” Zach asked.

Ed tapped the clipboard against his chin while he thought. “Nothing but more stuff for the Mahdists to collect from the dead.

The next morning they met with Jacob and Sam, again. They offered the surplus weapons and ammunition. They also agreed to call for volunteers, but didn’t hold out much hope. Jacob thanked them and Sam muttered something under his breath, which was ignored.

“All we can say is ‘good-luck’, Jacob. We are hostile with the Mahdists, but we are not looking for a shooting war. We have had a few scouts out towards the Rio Grande and the area around Taos is sparsely populated.

“I don’t know, maybe, you could relocate there?” offered Carl.

Jacob thanked them for the offer, but opined that his people would continue to fight. The Great Lakes area was their home, now.

Several wagons were loaded with the arms and supplies and driven to the Mound and turned over to Jacob’s men. There were eight volunteers riding along with them.

Chapter 12

Kansas Refugees

Fall 2045

I don't know what to do about the New Africans. I understand their need for help against the Mahdists. They need manpower, weapons and supplies. Then they turn around and antagonize us. That Turner fellow has really poisoned them against us and, maybe, everyone not of New Africa. The theory of the world settling into tribal groups seems to be coming true.

Well, we have winter to get set for. There is sure a lot of work that goes into this. No wonder our ancestors were such hardy folk. They had to scramble from sunup to sundown just to break even.

I hope John Singleton can work his magic with the March Power Supply. It would really advance our 'civilization' if we could be out of the horse and wagon era and go right to solar powered cars. John thinks, and the rest of the scientists agree, that March probably found the prototype in some lab and had enough ability in his group to duplicate it. John said that he had heard there was a push to develop something like this by the government. He didn't realize that it was so close to completion. As enthusiastic and upbeat as he usually is, he did say that the power plant was one thing; the development of an engine which could use it efficiently was needed. The vehicles that he converted wouldn't go over thirty miles an hour, less with a load.

Life settled back into the norm. The community turned to gathering fuel for the winter, now that the harvest was in. Coal was stockpiled and cordwood was stacked and covered.

The engineers had managed to duplicate the power system that General March was using and they had a trial vehicle running tests. They were having trouble with batteries, but were confident that they could overcome this small glitch.

Shortly after the first snowfall, First Rangers sent a message from Rio Grande. They had met a train of refugees from Kansas. This was the first of the Fundamentalists from East Kansas. Benton Robison sent back a wire to escort them to the Gunnison area and help get them settled in. He also asked for a list of supplies they would need.

Ed activated several troops and moved them to Rio Grande. He ordered ranger troops to the eastern slope on patrol. Carl and Zach led the troopers south and Jerry Carter followed with supplies.

When they arrived at the turnoff to Rio Grande, there were Troops Nine, Fourteen and Fifteen mustered and Fifth and Sixth Rangers on patrol. Zach and Carl met with the leaders of the refugees, the troops and leaders of the Rio Grande community to assess the situation.

Willy Potter grinned at them, his wizened face grizzled with a three-day growth of beard. “We took your advice, you’ll notice,” he said, grasping Zach and Carl’s hands and pumping them hard. “It was left to almost too late. We got an ultimatum from New Jerusalem to send the sixty troopers or else. There were still some who dithered, but I brought one hundred and forty families with me. The rest are on the way, I hope, with the militia riding herd.”

“How many have we got?” Carl inquired.

“There are fifty-six, counting the Fifth and Sixth Rangers and Troops Nine, Fourteen and Fifteen,” reported John Grenier.

“We have around a hundred that can hold weapons,” said Willy. “I don’t know how many others will be coming, but the militia had about a hundred and twenty-six. Some of them will be driving wagons and such, I guess.”

“There’s about ten able-bodied in the settlement,” reported John Mitchelson.

“I want you to keep those ten there and, Willy, keep your men back. If whoever is following gets through us, you are the next line of defense.”

When they had left, Carl organized the remaining troops into defensive positions. He tried to order the girls back to the settlement, but they refused to go, saying that they had as much right as the boys to be there. Smiling at Carl’s discomfiture, Zach took the four snipers and selected positions on the hill overlooking the trail along the river.

The scouts came ghosting back to report that another, smaller group of wagons was coming in and they were in a hurry. “We couldn’t see much for the dust, but we didn’t hear any shots,” Paolo Fuentes reported. Carl repositioned them on the flanks to guard against a turning movement and sent a runner to inform Zach and his men that they were coming in hot.

A half hour later, the first of the wagons and riders appeared, the horses lathered. They toiled up the trail along the river and passed through the defender’s lines. Carl ordered them to drive the wagons to the town, detailing one of the girls as a guide.

The riders were ordered to dismount and join the line, but were cautioned not to fire unless ordered.

“What do you mean?” a young, stout boy of about fifteen said. “Those bastards chased us out of our homes. I want some payback.”

Carl realized that he could have used Willy there. He didn’t have time to tame the emotions of the newcomers. He was saved as Ed Black rode up and, having heard the exchange, shoved the boy off his horse. The boy landed with a thud and a startled cry.

“Petey, you want to be a hero, you ride out there,” he said pointing back to the plain. “Otherwise, you listen to these here gentlemen. Got me?”

“Yes, sir,” he humbly replied, dusting himself off. Carl put him in charge of holding the horses, along with ten other of the younger boys. He shook hands with Ed and asked him to take charge of the rest of his men as they came in.

“We’ll try and talk the Angels out of attacking, rather than start killing. With you boys we should be able to make them see reason. If you think there will be any other hotheads, send them back to the horses, too.

“Meanwhile, salt your men with ours. Oh, good to see you,” he tacked on.

A knot of fifty or so riders appeared and began to climb the trail. Gregory Bronski trailed them. “I’m the last,” he shouted to Carl as he passed his post. He dismounted and gave his horse to one of his men and settled down beside Carl.

“They should be thirty to sixty minutes behind us. We heard they were coming a couple of days ago and we sent off the first group, the ones that were ready to go. The rest couldn’t make up their minds until later and the militia stayed around.

“They have been closing in ever since. We left a couple of men to throw some shots at them and that sent them to ground the first couple of times, but they caught on that there weren’t many and overran the five we had doing it. Since then it has been a race. I’m just glad they didn’t catch us out there.” He spat tobacco juice at an innocent ant as he finished.

Carl asked him how many there were, but Gregory didn’t have a full count. He guessed that there were a couple of hundred. That was based on the size of the dust cloud.

The time crept by. The militia was getting restless, but the troopers quieted them down by example. They relaxed, chatted and some lay down and took a catnap. They shared out what food they had with the newcomers, but cautioned them to be sparing with their water.

A little over an hour after the last of the stragglers had come in, a billowing cloud of dust was spotted in the distance. Slowly, figures could be seen through the dust that blew on a westerly wind. The riders discovered the trail and their leader signaled for a halt and rode forward to investigate. He cautiously advanced, but halted when Carl shone a mirror at him.

When Carl had the man's attention, he stood up and cradled his rifle in his arms to show his non-hostile intentions. Advancing down the trail, he waited until he was within hailing distance. He stopped beside a boulder large enough to provide cover, if necessary, and said, "Can I help you?"

The rider hooked a knee around his saddle horn and took a drink from his canteen before replying. "Are you one of the runners?"

"I don't think so," answered Carl. "I'm from up north. Mitchell. You one of the chasers?"

"My name is Michael. Some transgressors have taken refuge in those mountains. We are here to take them into custody. I would advise you to hand them over. This is not your argument and you really don't want to take it on."

"We have a policy of taking in those who want to join us. We only ask that they follow our rules. These people have agreed to do just that and they are now members of our little society. And, by the way, you have no authority here. The State of Jefferson lays claim to the mountains from Mitchell south to the Gulf. I would recommend that you turn around and head back to New Jerusalem."

"These are not your people," Michael said. "They are ours, subject to our laws and justice. We represent the guardians of that justice."

He swung his leg from its resting place and pushed his foot into the stirrup, and then he leaned forward and hissed, "Now, step out of the way."

Carl lifted his cap and gently swung it from side to side. Immediately, there was a shot and a puff of dust spurted in front of the horse. Its rider brought it under control and looked up the mountain. Everyone had something in his or her hand and was waving it to show Michael what he was facing.

The man sat, scowling for several seconds, then wheeled his mount around and rode through his men, waving them to follow. Carl knelt, expecting a volley, from spite. When nothing happened, he rose and walked up the trail, a grin on his face.

First Troop was stationed along the eastern side of the mountain and Fifth Rangers mounted and followed the retreating riders. The rest of the jubilant party returned to the settlement where the troopers were treated to a feast, prepared by the refugees. The leaders of the expedition met to discuss the situation.

John Mitchelson offered to send an escort with the Kansans to show them the way to Gunnison. Gregory asked Willy to take a tally of the supplies and asked if they could draw from the general stores to supplement the supplies they brought. Zach offered that Jerry Carter would be bringing additional supplies in the next few days, since they had not been sure what the Kansans would bring with them.

Carl asked Gregory to have a roster drawn of the sixteen to twenty-five year-olds males. They would, temporarily, form them into half troops and assign them to existing troops for training. After the training period was over, the troops would be realigned, depending on where they or their parents settled and their personal preference. The female auxiliary would remain in

Gunnison Settlement. Gregory thought there would be some grumbling about that, but, after it was explained to him, he agreed that it would be done.

Two Troops and two Rangers Troops would be stationed in the valley and conduct training missions there. A radio was with the supplies Gerry was bringing to try to establish a link between Rio Grande and Palo Duro, though Micha feared the distance was still too great to the latter.

Jerry Carter arrived the next day and left supplies with Rio Grande. The rosters had been drawn up and three new Troops, Eighteen, Nineteen and Twenty, were organized. The last two would be the Gunnison troops. The eighty-five troopers were divided among existing organizations and the new troops, with a melding of the experience Jefferson troopers and the new Gunnison troopers.

The rangers who had been following the Fundamentalists returned and reported that they hadn't stopped or turned off and they appeared to be heading back to New Jerusalem. Carl thanked them and sent them off to eat and rest.

"Jonathon," said Carl, tracking down the leader of the First Rangers, "I want you to tell Bill Williamson that he is the troop leader of the new Eighth Rangers and take these three new recruits. Finish eating and head out to Gunnison along the route we will be taking tomorrow." He showed Jonathon the route marked on a highway map of Colorado. "Clear the trail, if necessary, and keep an eye out for signs of traffic. I am sending the Eighth Rangers with you and I want you and Bill to do some training and assessing as you go.

"When you get to the valley, do the standard checking. Assess the water supply, buildings that can be occupied, ranches, the usual. I don't think the place has been checked thoroughly since we were deciding between it and Palo Duro for the last settlement.

“It will take us a week or so to get there, with the herds and all. Send a man back to let us know the situation. We will be bringing the new Eighteen, Nineteen and Twenty Troops and Mike O’Callaghan’s Eleven Troop, so there will be plenty of help, if you run into trouble.”

Jonathon jogged off to look to his men’s supplies and let Bill know the good news. Within the hour they had set out, after a brief orientation for the new recruits. Bill brought two men with him from the First Rangers and added three new recruits to make the Eighth.

The Fourth Rangers would bolster the Rio Grande Sixth Rangers for a few weeks and Sixteen Troop was on alert until Zach and Carl and Eleven Troop returned. The rest were sent home.

“John, I can have another troop stay, if you think you need them,” Carl offered before final dispositions were made.

“I appreciate it, Carl, but I don’t think there will be any problem and the Rangers and our troop can handle anything until we can get word to you. You will have the radio, won’t you?”

“Yeah, and we will check in the morning, at noon break and at night camp.

Several families decided to settle in Rio Grande, which welcomed them. The settlement got a big boost for their mill operation in a mechanic and a mill operations foreman, plus a couple of farmers and a teacher.

Several of the families that came in were Jewish and they decided to join the Palo Duro settlement and emigrate from there. John agreed to provide them with an escort once things had settled down or there was another supply train heading that way.

The remaining families rested for a day before heading out to Gunnison. They moved down the mountain with a screen of Rangers and a strong lead force of troopers. The trip south to the turnoff to Gunnison was uneventful, the weather clear and hot, though there were storms

over the plains raising a lightshow. At the turnoff to Highway 50, they met two Rangers who led them around Colorado Springs. They saw several small groups in the distance, but, even with field glasses, it was difficult to tell if they were reavers or scrapers, a term coined to describe those who had descended to the level of animals. It was rumored that they practiced cannibalism, but it had never been verified.

The rest of the trip through the mountains was uneventful. Salida was a burned out hulk, as were all other buildings they passed. There was a pass outside of Salida that a troop was making into a defensive stronghold. They had a gun emplacement ready for an artillery piece and were chiseling out a trench, like the one at Mitchell. They raised a cheer for the immigrant train and family reunions disrupted the work for an hour or so, until Zach started urging Gregory and Ed to get the wagons moving.

They reached the valley floor and met Jonathon, Bill Williams and Harry McGregor. As the families set up camp, the leaders of the expedition and the leaders of the Rangers spread out Forest Service Maps. The Rangers had noted the old homesteads, but informed the others that there were no buildings left standing.

“It looks like reavers have been through here recently and they burned everything they couldn’t carry off. A lot of it was for firewood, but there was just a lot of destruction,” Jonathon said. “We marked all the homesteads that had wells. Some of the equipment is still there and, I guess, can be fixed, those are circles; the circled ‘X’ stands for hand wells. We rigged rope and buckets and the water seems clean, at least it tasted okay.

“These with just an ‘X’ are windmills. Some are burned and some not, but the works need looking at, regardless.”

Zach walked away with Harry. “How did it go?”

“Jonathon and Bill were great. They laid out a training regimen and didn’t allow too much in the way of hazing. The new recruits took to it well and we were able to do a complete sweep of the valley. The only problem was a twisted ankle or two.

“I did give them hell for tasting the water, though. That was pretty stupid. Anyone engaging in the wanton destruction that was evident here would have no qualms poisoning the wells.”

They walked back to the briefing table as Bill was pointing to a series of squares drawn on the map. “These are the passes leading into the valley. The ones with an ‘X’, we figure on closing by using explosives and taking the canyon walls down. We would still have to keep an eye on them, but nobody could bring horses, much less vehicles, across. These others, we would have troopers stationed there, kind of like the smoke spotters in the old days.

“We haven’t gone any farther than Almont, but it was as bad as everything else. We need to send out an extended patrol to check out this circle from Gunnison to Crested Butte to Hotchkiss and Cimarron,” he looked at Stretch for support and continued. “Jonathon and I think that we can, eventually, cut 133 here, 92 here and 50 here and have complete control over this whole central area. The Black Canyon and Curicanti Parks will provide plenty of timber to build log homes and material for a mill to make lumber. I mean, there are other areas of trees, but those two places have roads and stuff.”

Zach nodded and said, “Great job, you two. For right now, get together with the troop leaders and set up posts to seal off just the valley area.

“Gregory, set up the radio and see if we can still get a signal. Hopefully, the mountains don’t cut us off. If we can’t get a message out to Rio for materials, can you send a couple of

rangers, Harry? John knows how many families were moving here, so he should have a pretty good idea of what is needed.”

“Yeah,” observed Ed, “we should get some sort of community shelters set up. It will be tight quarters for the winter, but in the spring we can start building individual houses.”

“Willy, can you get people moving to Gunnison and find a place we can start building? I want the cattle and sheep set to pasture and those not herding to start clearing an area for buildings. Have some of the younger men head to the woods and start collecting firewood. For now, only the downed, dry stuff. Pack it in and put it to one side of the building site.”

Within minutes the radio had been set up and, despite the interference, they got through to Rio Grande and John promised to start loading the wagons immediately. He asked for a troop to return and provide an escort, since he didn’t want to weaken his defenses. Carl ordered Nineteen Troop off the next morning.

Within three weeks the first load of supplies were being unpacked and stacked on the cleared ground. Eight large buildings had been staked out. The building site was on the Dos Rios Golf Course. They planned on using the sewage system already in place and the lines were clear to the treatment plant. The water pressure was good, after they tapped into the course’s irrigation system. The firewood pile was growing daily with several wagons hauling downed timber to the pile and a crew cutting and splitting and stacking.

Bob Milemski, an architect, had designed the buildings and, with help from Carl, Ed and Harry had taken into account overlapping fields of fire. Essentially the buildings were large barns. There were communal bathrooms at one end with a communal kitchen at the other. Down each side were large, one-family rooms. A rough loft was planned to provide addition living room. Bob admitted they weren’t elegant, but they were functional. Stoves were planned

for each of the living areas, but Zach was doubtful that the number required could be found. Gregory told him that most of the families had brought small Franklin or pellet stoves with them, having planned for this kind of emergency when they packed.

Zach figured that things were going well enough for him to take Eleven and Eighteen Troop and First Rangers and head back to Mitchell. He observed that he didn't want to get caught in the valley for the winter.

Gregory, was elected mayor, and Ed was appointed head of security. Carl and Zach had been watching Ed and were pleased at his tactical abilities and his rapport with the troopers. There had been some grumbling about living in communal housing, but Gregory had been able to quell it with logic and strength.

The town took a holiday to wish them good-by and the celebration was welcome after the unending labor of the last month. The next morning, the three troops, led by Zach, Carl and Harry, set out with the wagons from Rio and their drivers. Ed promised to send the sixty recruits for the troops in the spring, after the planting was finished.

Zach planned on adding six men to each of the existing troops and two each to the rangers. That would bring them up to a compliment of twenty and eight, respectively. When training was complete, two more troops and one ranger troop would be stationed in the valley, permanently. That would give them a strong presence in the central mountains and allow for absorbing more refugees in the Gunnison Circle. It was much bigger than Mitchell and better protected than Palo Duro. Zach saw where it could become the capitol of Jefferson in a few years.

They passed the East Camp position and waved to the troopers on duty. A small town would be constructed to house several families to provide for the troopers that were stationed

there, but, for now, a rough log cabin with an outhouse had been built. Those troopers not on duty spent most of their time cutting wood and hunting.

They parted ways with the Rio Grande wagons and made their way north through a series of late fall storms that left them cold and miserable. They were happy to finally pass the Mound and turn for home.

“Looks like its going to be another tough winter,” observed Carl, snuggling into his coat and tugging his cap, tied on with his scarf to protect his ears, down a little tighter.

“Yeah,” returned Harry. “Where is that Global Warming my dad used to talk about?”

Chapter 13

March's Reavers

Fall 2045

It's good to get home. I never realized how much I missed a family in the last few years of wandering. I must be becoming a sentimental slob; I got all misty eyed when I saw the place. Sarah is ready to deliver and looks better than ever. The kids were being kids, asking what I brought them. Ann Christopherson, in Rio, has started making rock candy from honey and I brought some for the little ones. Sarah and Maizey have limited the consumption for their broods, so I guess I'm not in too much trouble.

Even though it's good to have Gunnison settled, I am concerned about having the Kansans exclusively settle the area. I wish we could send some families from other areas to mix with them. I don't want a non-Jefferson enclave set up. I'll talk with the council about it. There are a few families talking about the lack of land to farm, even with the Valley opened up. Possibly, we can nudge a few to resettle. Sarah says that the troops will settle the problem, eventually. Ah, my little matchmaker at work.

The Troops are up to full strength, again. It will take the Kansans a little time to get used to our system, but scattering the new recruits with the existing troops will help with a sense of community. I am going to suggest that we assign two troops to Gunnison, along with the garrison troop of the married men.

We have had no news from New Africa. I hope they can hold out, and hold up, against the Mahdists. If they can't, it will allow the Mahdists to turn on someone else, the Fundamentalists (hopefully) or us or, maybe, the reavers, though there seems to be a symbiotic

relation there. The reavers trade supplies for slaves. I imagine the older boys and young men are recruited into their army and, as for the girls, well I hate to think of it. No, with second thoughts, I don't think the Mahdists are going after the reavers. From all reports, they have set up a town somewhere around Grand Island, on our side of the divide.

Work preparing for winter went ahead. The fuel suppliers redeemed a lot of hours. There was a brisk business in dry wood and coal. Several of the more enterprising troopers had gotten together and were scavenging power panels and bringing them back to be refurbished and sold by Singleton and Company. Zach, like a lot of others, had purchased several and reworked his heating and cooking systems to run on panel power or wood/coal, when the weather turned bad. There were a good supply of canning jars and the canners had refined their system of seals. The harvest was in and the fields burned for next year. It was a time to relax, finish repairs around the house, and make toys and games for the upcoming Christmas season, re-form the reading, knitting, quilting, and etc. clubs.

The only black spot was the report of a cave-in in Gold Camp. Several other miners were trapped. Leif Erickson was killed and Patrick Haakon was crippled. Relief supplies and a troop were sent to help dig out the trapped miners.

Zach was in the War Room enjoying a cup of real coffee, traded from an Aztec patrol by a patrol out of Gunnison. He had a packet of tea and one of chocolate in his coat pocket, also.

Ed observed, "Zach, I like your suggestion about sending another troop to Gunnison. With the size of the area, even with cutting the access, another troop can relieve the pressure on the garrison. Anyway, that area will be our breadbasket, I bet, by the time all is said and done. We've added 576 new settlers to Jefferson. In addition, three new troops of mounted infantry and a new troop of rangers, to say nothing of the additional skills that the new people bring."

Zach nodded and set down his coffee cup, slowly, on the table at his elbow.

“Ed, I am a little hesitant on this plan to attack the reavers, however,” he said, after a moment’s hesitation. “Say we find them. The Kansans aren’t integrated, yet, but say they were, reports are that the reavers number in the hundreds. You’ve heard the reports. The Fundamentalists are taking a battering. A lot of them are sitting ducks on little farms and in small settlements. The Empty Zones are getting bigger and bigger. The Mahdists are using the reavers to get rid of the Fundamentalists for them while they are warring against New Africa.

“The only reason they leave us alone is because we are pretty protected in our mountains. Palo Duro is isolated and too far when there are better pickings in the southeast. Two Wolves has been pulling back the Sioux from their borders, even. The last time Old Man Short was through here, he said his people are about ready to move in with the Sioux and leave Oklahoma.

“Now, let me have my say, Ed” Zach continued, holding up a palm to stay a reply from the older man. “I agree that there is a danger from them. Rather than mount a full expedition, lets work with the Oklahomans and hit any group that is encroaching on our territory. Hit them a few times when they come west and they will leave us alone for easier pickings.

“We got a radio message a couple of days ago from Rio that Short wants to talk with us. Let’s meet him and find out what his thoughts are. If they don’t want to help, then, fine, we can figure something out ourselves.”

“Okay, Zach,” Ed responded. “We can sit here and do little things, but, eventually, we will have to face the facts. If the Mahdists take over New Africa and the reavers cripple the Fundamentalists and the Sioux retreat into the west, that leaves us as prime targets. Agreed, the Kansans aren’t ready. I’m not suggesting that we leave tomorrow, but we need to do something.

“This General March may be a horse’s ass, but he seems to be able to get things done. There is a lot of equipment out there and I can see his getting his hands on more artillery and tanks than we can handle and that will be the end of us.

“Hell, add the Mahdists into the mix and they won’t need the firepower, they can just overwhelm us with sheer numbers.” He stood up and moved over to the large-scale maps. “It’s a thousand miles between Mitchell and Palo Duro. It takes a week from Mitchell to Gunnison. They could hit us anywhere with overwhelming numbers and pick us off like they are doing with the Fundamentalists.”

Zach joined him at the maps. He put a pin between Grand Isle and Lincoln, Nebraska. He indicated the one at Branson, Missouri. “The reavers are here, in eastern Nebraska, between the Fundamentalists in Branson/New Jerusalem and the Mahdists in New Mecca, here, close to Cedar Rapids, Iowa. From what we can find out, the reavers are moving their center of operations slowly east and south, as the pickings are finished in northern Kansas, eastern Nebraska and northern Missouri. That puts them on a move away from us.”

He forestalled Ed’s protest by continuing, “Settle down, will you and let me finish? Remember that March wants to create his own little empire. My guess is that he has his eyes on New Jerusalem. It’s in the Missouri hills and, while not as good a position as here, it has a lot going for it.

“The Fundamentalists have always been a loose confederation. They are fragmenting more and more. Look at what happened with our own Kansans. There is no cohesion. It resembles the Middle Ages when there were boatloads of little kingdoms, duchies, city-states and just large farms. Given a halfway capable leader and you could pick them off one by one.

“Mark my words, he is poking and prodding them. Giving them the torture of a thousand cuts. When they are ready, he will stand up and offer them hope of peace.

“Oh, it will be the peace of any dictator, but it will be peace. I can almost read that bastard’s mind. He will promise that the reavers will be controlled. All he asks is that they accept his stewards, gaulleitters or whatever he calls them. He will do to them what he tried to do to us. Take their guns and freedom in exchange for peace to raise their crops and children. And, mark me here; when he has solidified his control, he will create an army to take over the rest.”

“Well, doesn’t that just show that we have to stop him now?” asked Ed, exasperated.

“No. Because his plan will take years to complete. What we need to do, now, is train, accumulate weapons, encourage the Fundamentalists to emigrate here and build more settlements. Make the Rockies a fortress. Then, when he is most vulnerable and his attention is directed east, hit him from the west. Soften him up with a fifth column.”

“That’s all well and good, if he does what you expect. If his mind works like you say and he follows your plan, then maybe we could counter him like you want, Zach. My feeling is that it won’t take years. The Fundamentalists government is rotten; the people are sick and tired of Simmons and his gang. They are going to welcome March, not because he can keep the reavers in line, but because he can deliver them from Simmons.

“They have been living in a theocratic swamp for years and I will bet you that they will take anyone who will deliver them.

“I further bet that we could go in there with our tanks and take Simmons and put him on trial and hang him and we would be welcomed as heroes.”

Zach raised his arms above his head and asked, “Then why don’t we?”

“Because that would leave Jefferson helpless. We have, what, four hundred troops, including the garrison troops. That and four tanks would probably get us New Jerusalem and Simmons, but what happens when the Mahdists hear about this? They break off from New Africa and hit us with everything they can muster.

“Do you think the militia, without any armor or heavy weapons, could hold them off? Even if we gathered everyone in Mitchell or Gunnison or Palo Duro, how long could they hold out and what would happen to all our hard work over the last five years?

“I’m sorry, Zach,” Ed continued, after taking a deep breath, “we have to stop him now, before it gets out of hand. We can ask the Oklahomans for help and approach the Fundamentalists that are in March’s path.”

Zach looked around for support, but the rest wouldn’t meet his gaze and he realized that he was alone in his opinion. He walked back to the map and studied it for a few minutes. Finally, he turned and addressed them. “You guys are the military experts, not me. I’ll take your word for it. Let’s stop March now. Where and how?”

“First, we have to find them, then we have to determine where to hit them, third, we have to lure them to where we want them and, fourth, we have to wipe them out. Simple, huh?” Ed stated.

“That seems simple enough,” said Harry.

“Great broad plan,” Zach said.

“Let’s break it down, then. First, we send out the First Rangers. Jonathon has his men in shape. I propose we dress them as reavers, give them a couple of packhorses with some of the stuff we have taken from other reavers, the jewelry, silver, gold; throw in a couple of bottles of

booze and some extra weapons. Send them east with a shadow, which would be Fourth Rangers.”

“How about a shadow of First Troop under Matt? When the reavers are spotted, Matt chases the First Rangers. Gives them their bona fides, in a way.” Carl suggested.

The men approved the modification to the plan. Harry, tipped back in his chair with his feet resting on the table, raised his hand and said laconically, “The only thing I would watch out for is to make sure that no one from March’s camp has seen anyone we send in with the First Rangers.”

“Damn, First Rangers were with us, we had better send Fourth Rangers instead. I’m sure glad someone is thinking. Thanks, Harry.

“So Fourth Rangers, chased by First Troop.”

“That gets them in, hopefully. What gets them out?”

“They just came in to trade. When they are done, they leave. Ask March to let them join him. They want to go back for the rest of the band and their, their skags,” Zach spat out.

The plan was fine tuned, mismatched weapons and trade goods. The men were to wear worn out clothing and run down boots to look like a gang on its last leg, to discourage being followed and robbed.

Zach said that they had to have a few days growth of beard and bathe infrequently. “Most importantly,” he said. “Don’t tell anyone except the four of us and the two troop leaders about the plan. There have been a lot of newcomers and I would hate to have this get out, it would mean the end of the rangers. I suggest that we send the rangers on a scout to the south tomorrow. In a week the First Troop meets them at the ruins of Peetz, also on a regular patrol.”

The men agreed and it was left to Harry to find Paolo Fuentes and let him know the plan and caution him about telling anyone, even his own men, until they were away from Mitchell.

Zach was to relay the information and the same orders to Matt.

The next morning, Paolo took his men and faded out of town.

A week later, on their normal rotation, One Troop left on an extended scout to the west. There was nothing to do, then, but wait. Zach visited town daily until Carl suggested that he was making it obvious that something was up and he stayed away, trying to get his cattle and horse breeding records up to date. When he found that he had recorded his prize stallion having mounted three cattle, including his prize bull, he threw his pen down in disgust, gathered up the kids and went acorn hunting in the woods.

On the next regular market day, a week later, there was a crowd around the War Room. Zach had a sick feeling in his stomach and forced his way through the throng. The sweating guards let him in and closed the door behind him. Matt was standing in front of a short, thick man tied to a chair. Two of Matt's troopers were standing behind the prisoner. Ed, Carl, Jimmy Pinder and Jerry Carter were seated in chairs behind the map table.

"Come in, Zach," called Ed, waving him to a chair. "Matt was just about to tell us the tale and how he came upon this miscreant."

Zach relaxed; obviously, Ed was in high good humor, so there was no disaster in the making. He sat and nodded to Matt. The troop leader putt up a large scale map of Nebraska on the wall.

"We set out, like ordered, to the west. Then we circled around and headed for Peetz. When we got there, Paolo had left Kyle Summers there with information on where the reavers were located."

He pointed to a spot near Lincoln where US 81 and I-80 intersected, called York. “We sent Kyle off to rejoin Paolo and set out along I-80 a couple of hours later. After a couple of days, we spotted a flash from Paolo’s heliograph and we closed to within a mile of them and bedded down in a deep wash.

“We waited for two days before we got another signal. We mounted and closed with the rangers and they started shooting and running to the east. We let off a volley and chased them for a couple of miles until we met a large group of reavers heading for us. We let off another volley and beat feet down the road. Their last shots nicked Mark Soleto, but it wasn’t serious,” Matt smiled and looked at the trooper. Now, he has a scar he can show Jane Parker”.

Even though he tried to ignore the jibe, a slow blush crept up Mark’s face and he tightened his lips and glared at Matt.

There were grins from the rest of the attendees, with the exception of the prisoner. Matt continued, “We didn’t have a problem outrunning the reavers behind us. A couple of days later we ran into this guy’s group. We heard them coming a way off and we set up an ambush. We opened up and killed or panicked them. They abandoned the wagon they were driving. Our friend, here, was only stunned and we figured that a prisoner to interrogate was a bonus so we dragged him along. We brought the wagon and loose horses in.”

Carl nodded, “Good job. Did you promise this clown anything? I mean, we don’t want to do something when you promised something else.”

The prisoner, who had been sitting in a scowling silence, perked up and shouted, “He promised to give me a horse and let me go, if I answered your questions.”

Carl arched an eyebrow in a questioning look and Matt nodded. “I promised if he answered truthfully that we would give him a horse and let him go.”

“Zach, did you get the intel you wanted from the scouts?”

Zach, picking up on the charade, answered, “Yeah, they said...”

“Keep it to yourself, for now. I want you to check it against the answers this guy gives.”

“Oh, right,” said Zach and he took out a notebook and opened it. “Shoot,” was all he said, staring at the book.

“All right,” Ed said, leaning forward and fixing the prisoner with a baleful eye. “Where is the trading post?”

“Uh, York. They been in York for a couple of months. Tradin’ with other guys and the rag heads. Last time they were somewheres else.”

“How long are they planning to stay there?”

“Oh, you know, another couple a months, maybe.”

“Then what?”

The man licked his lips and answered, “I don’t really know. There was some talk ‘bout going to the, uh, um, east. Yeah, east.”

It was obvious that he was lying and Ed looked a question at Zach, who turned a couple of pages in the book as if looking for something.

“No, no. I, I mean, uh, south. We are going south. The General wants to start going against the Jesus Freaks, you know, the New Jerusalem types.” The prisoner was sweating and licking his lips. He let out a relieved sigh when Zach nodded.

“How many men are with the General?”

“It varies. Something like, oh, ah, three hundred, on average. Could be as high as five hundred and as low as two hundred. Depends on how many he gots tradin’. On slow days, there’s only the General and his men, that’s the two hundred.”

“What kind of weapons does this general have? Tanks? Artillery? Machine guns? Planes? What?”

“No we ain’t got no tanks. There’s a couple of mortars and two small AP guns that have been rigged for HE, six or eight machine guns. Oh, there are a couple of armored halftracks with machine guns.”

“What’s the schedule on the guards?”

“There’s always a couple of dozen guards on the buildings. I don’t know any schedule, man, I don’t pay any attention to that! But, that’s why the General likes York, the suburbs are burned down and there’s only the business district left and the buildings are brick and flat roofs.”

Zach and Ed exchanged looks. It sounded like Rawlins all over again.

“What happened to the people of York?”

“There weren’t no people. The rag heads had already been there and cleaned it out. They killed any they didn’t want and took the rest for farmers, hostages, their army, whatever.”

“How close are the nearest Mahdist troops?”

“Well, there’s a small garrison in Lincoln with a lot of farmers. I think only a dozen or so. Most of their army is up fighting the darkies or along the border with the Freaks. They don’t think there’s much to worry about from you, with the General between them and you.”

“Where do the other gangs come from that you trade with?”

“All over,” he seemed proud of the fact. “The General gives the best prices and has good booze, not the junk most of us make, ourselves.”

“Where do most of the traders come from? What direction? Do you have an idea of where they are headquartered?”

“Oh, most of them come from the south. You guys make it too dangerous to head west, but some of the weaker gangs still try to get the redskins, but they are pulling back to the hills and it’s tougher. Others go after the darkies to the north, but the war gets in the way. We don’t go northeast, that’s where the rag heads are. East is pretty picked clean by the rags and the freaks. The best hunting ground is south. That’s where we were coming from.”

“How big are the bands, usually?”

“Sometimes a couple of hundred, but mostly seventy-five or eighty. Any more and the freaks will see the dust.”

“Has the general told any of these gangs where to go?”

“Oh, yeah. Standin’ orders are to stay out of your territory. Stay out of the rags’ territory. He says to hit towards Wichita and over to St. Louis. He wants the freaks really stirred up.”

“Why?”

The prisoner started to speak, then snapped his mouth shut and dropped his head.

“Why?” Ed repeated.

“Don’t know.”

“WHY?” snapped Ed.

“Man, I don’t know. I think he wants to get them mad at the head bible toter and then they won’t be thinkin’ ‘bout us.”

“How big is your band?” Ed said quietly.

The prisoner hesitated. They could see the calculation in his bloodshot eyes. They knew he was thinking about lying. He finally nodded to himself and said, “Between fifty and sixty, with a couple of dozen skags.”

Ed shot a look at Zach and asked, "Where are they located?"

No hesitation, this time

"We got a camp just above I-70, in Colby, Kansas. The pickings are pretty slim, right now and we were moving to the Dodge City area, next. We managed to scavenge the area, but there weren't no people. They all left, or most of them did, anyway."

"Where are the gangs around you, the locations, how many, whatever you can think of."

"Oh, there's 'bout five big gangs. Say, bigger than a hundred in 'em." He thought a moment, moving his fingers as he mentally counted. "And, maybe, twenty, twenty-five smaller gangs spread out. Then there used to be a bunch of real small gangs, eight, ten, twelve guys, but they mostly got wiped out or joined the big boys."

"Those farmers was getting organized and there was a new, kinda, police that came out of New Jerusalem and started tracking the little guys down. You know the locals," he said, sounding resentful that his victims would dare defend themselves. "The General said to leave a area alone for a couple a years and people would move back in, but we don't know, 'cause it ain't been a couple a years, yet." He began sounding like a farmer talking about rotating crops.

Ed nodded to indicate that they had gotten all they could out of him. Zach snapped his notebook shut and nodded to Matt. "Hang him."

"You can't do that," the prisoner wailed indignantly. "It's not fair. I told you the truth."

Zach looked surprised. "Were you fair when you raped, murdered and sold people into slavery? Tell me how fair you were and I'll let you go."

Tears streaked down the man's cheeks as the troopers dragged him from the room.

"Makes you want to take a shower," commented Harry, opening windows.

Carl shook his head in disbelief. “He made it sound like a business. Take this, trade there, move so-and-so. Makes you sick.”

“Ed, do we go after the rest of his gang?” asked Zach.

“Do you think they are still there? I bet the survivors scampered into camp and panicked the rest with tales of hundreds of us charging around slaughtering honest reavers. No, my bet is that bunch packed up and took it on the run. We can send Ten Troop with, who,” he said, looking at the duty board, “Third Rangers to make sure that they did head south. And, if they are dumb enough to stay put, then they can radio back here for backup.”

Carl stood and said, “I’ll take care of it,” and left to find Evan and Jonathon.

One, Four and Thirteen Troops were alerted that they could be called on at any time for the expedition against the reavers. Ed suggested that Eighteen Troop out of Gunnison be sent on a long scout to the east and maintain radio contact with Ten. It would give them some field experience and put them within striking distance, if necessary.

Chapter 14

Wait

Fall 2045

Everyone is as nervous as a cat since Paolo and his men left. Sarah hasn't said anything, but I know she is concerned about me. I find myself spacing out in the middle of a conversation or forgetting what I was talking about. I have the urge three or four times a day to run to the Council and mount an expedition to pull them out. If those boys get killed I won't be able to face their families.

I still think that we should leave March alone and just set up a defenses in the mountains. I know that this is against everything a Sun Tsu or Clauswitz teaches, but they didn't have a lot of civilians to worry about. Attack is fine if you aren't worried about wives and children getting slaughtered while you are away.

I can't concentrate on writing!!!!

For the next few weeks things returned to a tense normalcy. The only newsworthy event was 'Doc' White reporting that there was an outbreak of Rocky Mountain Fever in Black Valley. Two youngsters died, but the epidemic had been stopped.

Ten Troop radioed in, using the agreed upon code, to let them know that the reavers had left the Colby area, but they had met up with Four Rangers and were bringing them in.

The full Council was called and Paolo was brought in to report, after he had cleaned up and eaten. Telegrams were sent to alert the other settlements, but Ed cautioned against using the radio since the General could pick it up, though the chances of it happening were slim.

When Paolo entered the Council chambers, he was asked to report. He had brought several maps with him and he pinned a large map of the central plains on the board and turned to the Council table.

“You know about our getting into York, I imagine. That worked really well, you know. We were welcomed with open arms and a lot of the General’s men wanted to give chase, but he vetoed it. I mean, he said that we would be taken care of in good time, or something like that.

“We, you know, were sent for by the guy in charge of keeping the place peaceful. They called him the provost. I mean, every new bunch is. He asked us where we were from and where we had been raiding. We said that we were from eastern Nebraska, but things were getting picked over, you know. I cussed you out pretty bad, you know, and said that you had raided our camp in Peetz in the early summer and nailed the Baron. We told him we were out raiding, you know, I mean, and weren’t there. We got a few of the guys that managed to escape and set up, again, you know, in eastern Oklahoma.

“He had us point to where we moved and, you know...”

“Excuse me, Paolo, but can we have the report without all of the ‘you knows’ and ‘I means’? If we knew you wouldn’t have to report to us,” Gail O’Malley said, gently.

“What? Oh, I’m sorry, you kn, um, yes, Ma’am,” the embarrassed young man stammered.

“Go on,” encouraged Ed.

“Well, he said to come back when we were ready to leave. I asked him if there were any openings, you, um, any openings. We needed a bigger gang, now that we had lost most of our old one and there were only twenty-two of us left. He said that wasn’t his department and herded us out of there.

“We took our swag and started visiting the town. They really have an operation there. The General owns the trading post and the bar and the brothels and the drug dens and the restaurant. He charges whatever prices he wants. We traded our swag for shells, supplies, liquor and some drugs. We had a credit, so we got some script we could use in the other places. We had a meal and went to the bar for a beer.

“We took it easy and just started picking up information.” He opened a notebook and, referring to it often, pointed out on the map. “Here is where a pretty big gang is located. We were warned away from there, and here and here. It seems the General has doled out territories for the bigger gangs and they, well, sublet it to smaller gangs. We did get offered this section northeast of St. Louis, but the guy wanted ten percent of everything we took in.

“They seemed to accept us without question and, when we left that afternoon, no one tried to stop us. Before we left, we went to see the provost and he said that the ten percent offer was a good one and we should take it. He told us to take that or head down to the Tulsa area, but stay on the eastern side of the York/Wichita/I-135/I-35 line. When we asked him why, he said that there were plans for the Jesus Freaks and the General wanted to keep you fat, dumb and happy until those plans were complete. He said that we would regret it and that the territory south of here was richer, anyway.

“They are really worried that we are going to step in, if you are stirred up. We were told that there were several other small gangs down there, since the General hadn’t divvied that up, yet, to the big boys. He encouraged us to become one of the big boys and he would speak to the General about giving the territory to us.”

Paolo took a drink of water and asked if there were any questions.

“Do you have any idea how big the ‘big boys’ are?” asked Ed.

“I got the impression that they are more than a hundred men. The medium gangs are around sixty or seventy and anything under thirty is considered small.”

“What are the defenses?” asked Stretch.

“Oh,” said Paolo, pinning up a second sheet of paper. This one was a hand drawn rendering of York. “While wandering around town, we were able to get a pretty good idea of where the guards were. There were a lot of them, too.” He pointed to buildings around the town. “There were, at least, two on top of the bank, the trading post, the old post office, the town hall and in the Methodist Church steeple. There were other guards on the tavern, the brothels, here and here, and the drug den, here. There were three-man patrols in the town and the tavern and the brothels had six or seven men each, but these were for the customers, not invaders.

“We heard about mounted patrols around the town in the armored cars, but we didn’t see anything.

“The town center is surrounded by a no man’s land that has been cleared of everything. The houses were torn down and burned; any trees or bushes were cut. There is a standing rule that anyone in this area is shot on sight. It looked tougher than Rawlins, from what I hear.”

“Is there regular schedule to the scavengers? Do they all leave at once or return at certain time or intervals?” asked Julius Rosaia.

“No, the General’s men rarely do any of the raiding, themselves. They just operate the town. They get their supplies from what is brought in or from the Mahdists for the slaves. The slave auction only happens once every two weeks. Most of the raiders don’t want to wait around, so they sell their captives to the General. He keeps them in the county jail until the auction. And that is heavily guarded, too.

“So, the town always has two hundred men in town. If the General is running short of supplies, he will send out a hundred on a raid, but the minimum number of men in town is two centuries, that’s what they are called.

Ed looked around to see if there were any more questions. When no one raised their hands or spoke up, he thanked Paolo and complimented him and his men on a job well done.

He leaned back in his chair with a sigh and threw down his pen. “That is not good news, at all.”

“I think that we should leave well enough alone,” commented Edna March.

Several others around the table nodded in agreement. Others looked doubtful and she continued, “I don’t doubt the troops, but wouldn’t we have to send five or six of them just to match the bigger reaver gangs? I don’t think that we have anywhere near enough men to fight this General.”

“Edna, you are right if we just consider numbers. We do have a few extra assets on our side. We have several tanks, which will be almost invulnerable, if they stand and fight. We have five pieces of artillery, if they stand and fight. My fear is that they will scatter at the first signs of the tanks and the tanks are not as mobile or as fast as horses.

“The problem is getting them into a place where they have to stand and fight. We don’t have enough men to surround them and there aren’t enough mountains or box canyons or anything to trap them against or in.”

Zach asked that the Council adjourn and let the Defense Council take it up and report back. “It’s important that the Council heard what we are up against. Gail, would you write up your notes and duplicate them for the other settlements, please?”

“Ed, I suggest we call for the full Defense Council, including Palo Duro, and brainstorm on this. Meanwhile, let’s send Rangers to keep an eye on York. I would like to send a delegation to the Sioux and the Oklahomans and the Fundamentalists to meet and try to coordinate on this. I know the Fundamentalists are, probably, still smarting about the Kansans, but this is in their best interest, since they are the General’s first target.”

The Council, after desultory discussion, passed Zach’s suggestion and adjourned.

Chapter 15

The Operation: Planning

Fall 2045

This is really bad news. We should have gone after General March when we had him in our power. But, as they say, “woulda, coulda, shoulda”. I would like to cut down on the General’s men, but they don’t go out often. I hope the others are smarter than I am.

The notice had been sent out for a full meeting of the Defense Council. It took Ishar Singh a week of hard riding to reach Mitchell, but he arrived in high spirits and rubbed his hands with anticipation at the thought of impending action. They met in the Council chambers due to the number of attendees.

Ed stood at the board upon which several maps were tacked. With a laser pointer he quickly outlined the situation. He listed their assets as four hundred troopers and rangers, four tanks, five artillery pieces and several mortars, rockets, RPGs and the fact that they had plenty of ammunition for them.

“The downside,” he continued, “is that we would be stripping Jefferson with the exception of the militia and auxiliaries. My question? Do we want to take that risk and execute a frontal assault?”

“Of course, we don’t,” boomed Ishar Singh. “Can we pick them off piecemeal?”

“I’m afraid that would require a long time and they would just shift operations to put the Fundamentalists in between. Even if the Fundamentalists step aside, that gives us impossibly long supply lines through hostile territory.”

“Zach?” Hans said to get the floor. “You mentioned, last week, about sending a delegation to our allies and the Fundamentalists. What has become of that?”

“Right!” interjected Ed Black. “After we bolted on them, they are going to help us? I don’t think there is a chance in Hell, even if they let us get close enough to aks them.”

“Well, Ed is partly right,” answered Zach. “We sent them a messenger with a condensed version of the situation and we got an immediate negative response. Then the reavers, a big gang, hits Columbia, Missouri. Wipes out over two hundred families. Farms, towns everything, was gone. And,” he continued, “they had a fairly large, well-armed force there. They lost a training camp for their Guardian Angels, complete with weapons and the training cadre.

“Michael was, needless to say, angry. He went charging after them with anything he could muster and ran right into a trap. He barely got half of his force out.

“The one thing I will say about him, he doesn’t sugar coat anything. Right after that, he sent us a message with what happened and his willingness to meet with us.

Ed Black slowly stood, staring at the map of Kansas. “You have a topographical map of the Seldon area?”

Stretch pinned up the 1000 feet per inch scale map. Ed traced a finger over it. Everyone else in the room sat silently as he studied the area.

Finally, he tapped the map and turned to the rest of the Council. “Here’s a thought. We don’t have the strength to hit York, unless we hang around waiting for just the General and his forces to be there. We can’t do that, ‘cause a force large enough for that would be spotted, sure.

“We need to worry them. If we can get the Angels, Sioux and us to join up and nail one of the big bands, the General will have to move hastily or earlier than he is ready to move. I say, let’s hit a major reaver band and let a few get away to report back to March.

“Now, Seldon. I think there is a way to get one of the big gangs at Seldon. It would take the rangers to lure one, if one was in the area, to Seldon and influence the attack plan.” He pulled the map off the wall and laid it on the hastily cleared table. “Here’s Seldon. North, you see this forked ridge? The reavers could come down the easternmost branch. Around the tip we set up the tanks in this little cove. At the head of the western branch, a force waits for them to attack and swings over the ridge and bottles them up. Maybe, set a machine gun on the east side of the divide.

“North of the crossroads, where US83, US383 and 23 make this triangle, they are going to split their forces to cut off this area to trap the people of Seldon. We could send a force down this little draw and hit them when they attack Seldon.

“On the South side of town, there is a ridge that another force of raiders could swing around and attack from the southwest. On the eastern side of the ridge we have a troop waiting.”

He stood back while the rest of them studied the map and discussed the plan. His coffee-colored face split with a wide grin.

“Let’s discuss this,” Ed commented, at last.

Carl had been taking measurements and calculating manpower on a scrap of paper.

“Okay, let’s say a hundred reavers. The plan is logical, from a military point of view. Surprise attack, the forces at either end of town to bottle up the inhabitants. The only escape route leads them to the southern ridge. As far as that goes, Ed, it is a masterpiece.

“A couple of things, though. The tanks, I can see. The machine gun and cannon, loaded with High Explosive rounds would cut the attackers to pieces. Isn’t that right, Ron.”

Ron nodded and said that the reavers would be a pretty compact mass and the range would be pointblank.

Carl continued, “If they do split into three sections, and I think they will, unless they think they are modern day Cossacks, means that we need three forces. The bottling force behind the main attack, troop or troops to meet the western attack and a troop to take the eastern end of US383. We also need a troop to protect the tanks and hit them when they are disorganized by the tanks. That’s four troops at a minimum and I would suggest seven to ensure that the operation has enough men on our side to be successful. Two to bottle, two for each end of town and one with the tanks.

“Lastly, Seldon is unoccupied. Who is going to be the sitting duck? Say we put in a troop there. Do we want to send in an auxiliary to make it appear that there are families there? Should we do that and it goes horribly wrong, I would hate to think of the consequences, gentlemen.”

The smile had faded from Ed’s face. “Yeah, there are a lot of holes.”

“Not necessarily,” said Hans Minkema. “Here’s where the Fundamentalists come in. Put them over here, beyond the crossroads. They would be responsible for handling that end of town. Tell them to ‘populate’ the town. That would leave us completely mobile with the ability to bug out, if things turned into a disaster. The only thing I am worried about is the rangers. They will be all alone out there; any failure and they will be dog meat.”

“Let’s get Paolo in here,” Zach suggested and, when there was no dissent, he went to the door to instruct one of the runners.

Ed was saying, when he returned, “...bigger picture. There are several things that will have to fall in place.” He began ticking off on his fingers. “First, the Fundamentalists have to be brought on board. Second, there has to be a gang in the area and willing to execute the attack.

Third, the rangers would have to insinuate themselves into the plan. Fourth, we have to have sufficient fuel to get the tanks there and back.

“What am I missing? Anyone?”

Ron Buck held up a hand. “On point four, about the fuel. Singleton and company has been working on the solar engine design. If we can get from here to there with the tanks on solar power, we have plenty of solid fuel for maneuvering. Can we go get him, too?”

Zach dispatched another runner on that task and the first runner returned to report the Paolo Fuentes was on his way. He and Four Rangers had gotten in late the night before and he had been sleeping. Thanking him, Zach returned to the Council with the update.

They discussed other possible plans while waiting for Paolo, but none of them had the potential of the original. Paolo hurried in and the Council outlined the Black Plan and asked him his opinion.

“You know, I think that it is possible. I mean, the area east of the line down there was given to, you know, ...”

“Okay, Paolo, I have to agree with Mrs. O’Malley. ‘You know’ and ‘I mean’ are superfluous and let’s cut them out. This is a military briefing, not a bull session in the local pizza parlor,” Ed broke in.

“I’m, sorry, really. Uh, anyway, that’s ‘Red’ Bollinger’s territory. I hinted that we would like to join his gang, mainly because we told the Provost we were looking for another operation. He wasn’t interested, but we heard that he doesn’t like the rules the General has imposed. He has around a hundred and ten reavers and twenty or thirty skags, sorry, Zach. Most of the, uh, uh, women are part of the gang, not prisoners and are as tough as the men.

“About the plan. I’m pretty sure that he wouldn’t have a problem. It would just be the matter of the amount of the loot. He wouldn’t worry about us, since he, either, would make us members of the gang or kill us and take our loot. He is a tricky bastard.

“I couldn’t just take Four Rangers, though, they know that there are eight or ten more in my gang.”

“Would that make a big difference?” asked Stretch.

“Yeah, it would. He would want to know where the rest of the gang is, because he would suspect that we were leading him off so we could hit his camp.”

“Really?” asked Julius Rosaia. “He doesn’t sound so much tricky as paranoid.”

“My boys would be happy to be reavers,” boomed Ishar Singh. “They are growing bored in Palo Duro.”

“What about it? Would Indians cause any problem?” asked Ed.

“Not that I know of. ‘Red’ has blacks, Hispanics and Orientals in his gang. As far as I know, he may have Indians, Eastern or Western, too.”

“Okay, Ishar, get one of your ranger troops up here.” Ed said to the beaming Sikh.

“What timeline are we working on?” asked Jerry Carter. “It sounds too complicated, timing wise, to work.”

“Let’s look at that,” said Ed Johnson. “Oh, Paolo, sit down, you need to be in on this, if we decide to go on with it.

“What’s the first thing we have to have?”

“Get the buy-in from the Fundamentalists. Without their help, I wouldn’t get into it, myself,” said Zach.

“Good. Do you want to get a message to Michael?”

Zach wrote out a short note and sent off a runner to bring the on duty Ranger captain.

“Next?”

“Let’s see what condition Seldon is in?” said John Grenier.

Zach got up and asked runners to find all the ranger captains. “Might as well get them all, looks like we are going to need them,” he said, returning to his seat.

Jonathon Silver arrived first and he was given the message to take to the Fundamentalists.

“What’s next?” asked Ed.

“Find out where the reavers are. Since we are going to be part of this, let me do it,” said Paolo.

“Right. That’s your assignment. This will take a little more thought, however. Are you going to join him now, or wait?”

“Whoa. I think we are getting ahead of ourselves, here,” Harry said. “Before we go putting people in harm’s way, let’s get the nod from the Fundamentalists. And let’s figure some way for communication. Something fairly foolproof. No clandestine meetings or anything like that. If this ‘Red’ character is as paranoid as you say, he will keep an eye on our boys and won’t let them wander around untended. Am I right, Paolo?”

Paolo nodded.

Just then, John Singleton came in. He was dressed in his usual dress shirt, jeans and spotted lab coat. He approached the table and stood there expectantly.

“John, we have a couple of questions for you,” Zach began. “How is the solar engine coming for the tanks and how can we leave messages in secret and have somebody find them, without knowing exactly where they were being left.”

“Well, the tank engines are ready for testing. We have retrofitted one of the new ones. It is in the lab,” he answered. The lab was an old barn that had been taken over by the scientists and stocked with scavenged equipment, mostly from the bunker.

“As to the other, do you mean like leaving a message in a hollow tree?”

“Not exactly. Here, the situation is that we are going to infiltrate a reaver band and we want to have messages from them, but we can’t have them leaving camp or the march and meeting with someone. Does that help?”

John absentmindedly took a pen from his pocket and began moving it from finger to finger, back and forth across his hand, while he thought. He snapped the pen back into his pocket and said, “Kind of like a key-rock with a tracking device. That would work, gentlemen.”

“Do you want to explain it to the rest of us, then, John,” prodded Stretch.

“A key-rock was used to hide a key. The homeowner put an extra key in this hollow container made to look like a rock. Then the key-rock was put in among other, real rocks. Kind of like hiding it in plain sight.”

“So we have a message in a fake rock, sitting in the middle of Wyoming. I would agree that the message was safe, but how would we find it, even if we had glasses on it from a hundred yards away, we would lose sight of it when we went to pick it up.”

“Yes, you would. Unless, you had a transmitter attached.”

“Wouldn’t that be a little obvious, John? Having an antenna sticking out of a rock?” quipped Harry.

“Don’t be an idiot, Harry,” John shot back. “You are aware of miniaturization, I would imagine. The old concept of LoJac. We would put a miniature transmitter, the size of a pencil eraser, into the rock. A miniature power source, say heat inductor, if you are using it where there

is a modicum of sun. Write your message, put it in the rock, put in the plug, drop the rock and walk away.

“The intended recipient, knowing the general area, that’s thirty miles, hits a switch to send the turn on signal and another to receive the locator signal. Then just follow the signal, find the rock and read the message. Voila.”

“And we have a supply of these message rocks?” asked Ed Black.

“No, not to hand, but we have the receiver, batteries and transmitters from the Bunker. They were attaching them to mice, voles and such in some kind of experiment. We also have a laser cutter from the Bunker and, with that; we can hollow out as many rocks as you need, given the time and the rocks, of course.”

“Ron, will you coordinate testing the new engine with our resident genius, here? And thanks, John; you have been a big help.”

“See me later when you are done here and we’ll run some tests. Oh, I can retrofit almost any vehicle with the new engines, you know. Back to the age of the automobile

“And, Zach, you are welcome.” He left with a wave of his hand, hurrying, as usual.

“That guy wears me out,” said Harry.

“He has gotten worse, since the Bunker. Before he just had high school science lab equipment. With the stuff from the Bunker, he is a new man. Not sure I like the new man, but new man he is,” answered Zach.

“Next?” Ed Johnson asked.

The Council door opened and Homer Banker, from Eagle, Todd Spires and Owen O’Callaghan were ushered in. The three ranger captains sat in the front row. Ed explained the operation and asked Todd to take his troop and check out the Seldon area. He had a couple of

recruits from that area. Homer was asked to head to Palo Duro, by way of Gunnison and alert Jimmy Williams of Eighteen Troop to be ready to move at a day's notice, but not to tell anybody about the proposed operation. At Palo Duro, he was to instruct the Seven Rangers and Sixteen Troop to report to Gunnison to wait for Ishar Singh. They left immediately to organize their expeditions.

"What else?" Ed, again, asked.

"Supplies? Arms, fuel, food and camping gear," answered Paul Ericson, anxious to make a contribution.

"Good. But, before we get supplies, how many men are we taking?"

"Seven? Two for the cork, one for the tanks, two for the eastern road and two for the western end?" answered Harry. "That's a hundred and twenty. I would say that we need, at least, one of the rangers, but, probably two. Round that up to a hundred and forty. Oh, and the tanks, that's twenty-four more, so, let's say, one hundred and sixty-five."

"Owen, have one of the runners find Mr. William Smith and ask him if we have rations for one hundred and sixty-five men for two weeks. No hunting on their part. And caution him to silence."

"Mounts," said Zach, before Ed had time to ask.

"One hundred and sixty-five, ten percent remounts and packhorses. No, the packhorses can be used for remounts, when the supplies are used. Zach, what do we usually use in the way of packhorses?"

Zach wrote furiously. "About forty for the food and gear. Fewer, if we load up the tanks. Do we want wagons? There will be wounded."

“I don’t want to weigh down the tanks any more than necessary. As much as we might need them, wagons will slow us down and force us to stick to roads. I think we chance it without wagons. Do we have two hundred plus mounts?”

When Zach nodded, he went on. The meeting managed to work out all the details before they adjourned at three in the afternoon. Zach invited Ishar Singh to stay with him and the Sikh gladly accepted.

The next few days were spent refining the plan and assembling the supplies. Zach took his sharpshooters and knocked the rust off their skills. They spent several hours each day shooting and several more loading their own shells, field stripping and cleaning their weapons. New silencers were issued and the protective coverings inspected for wear.

A week later, a delegation arrived at the Front Door. They were from Michael and, when escorted to the Guest Ranch, proved to have the authority to speak for him.

“He would have come himself, but there’s trouble up near Saint Louie. What is this deal you got cooking?”

Ed Johnson explained the essence of the operation to the man, who, though he looked like an ignorant farmer, scruffy beard, out at the knees pants that were too short for him and a vacuous expression, had an intelligence which soon gained the respect of the Committee, when they met. He asked probing questions and went over the plan forwards and backwards.

“It’s a good plan,” he finally stated. “How many men do you want from us?”

“To cut off 383, fifty. To populate the town? That is up to you. It has to look like there are enough to make an attack rich pickings, but not so many that it looks too tough a nut to crack.”

“Now, that will take a bit of thinking. The combined force will be close to two hundred and fifty, with four tanks. That should be enough to do the trick, unless they have a lot more men than we think. Michael figures that a hundred or so is about all that pillaging can support. The logistics are too much for more. The General, however, has it set up right. Let the people who take all the risks come to you.

“When is the last date for the thing to get under way?”

“It will have to be soon. Our scouts say that the town is empty, still and the reavers are somewhere around Emporia, Kansas. We have to establish contact, convince this ‘Red’ that the attack will work and get the attack set before the snows come. Otherwise, we delay until spring,” Ed outlined.

The committee knew that there was increasing pressure on New Jerusalem to do something about the reavers. A victory over a sizable band would go a long way towards silencing the critics. The negotiator, who called himself Rafael, rubbed his chin then stuck out his hand. “We will meet you in Seldon in two weeks.”

Chapter 16

The Operation: Execution

Fall/Winter 2045/2046

I had my doubts about this operation, but with the Fundamentalists on board, it just may work. There doesn't seem to be any trouble getting the 'good guys' in place, logistically. Now it depends on Paolo. Can he convince 'Red' to attack?

Paolo, who was at the meeting, ran from the room and roused the Fourth and Seventh Rangers and they were pounding down the road within the hour, heading for Kansas. Zach went to the War Room and sent a message to Rio that the operation was on and to meet the Mitchell contingent at Goodland, Kansas in a week.

The tanks had been fitted with the modifications necessary to run on solar power. They were not capable of going at more than thirty mph with the modifications, but that should be fast enough to make the rendezvous on time.

It was decided to cut the Jefferson contingent by two troops, since Michael was committing more than enough to compensate for them.

Second Rangers spread out to cover the advance, followed by One Troop, then the tanks with Four Troop, while Eleven Troop brought up the rear with the pack animals. The trip to Goodland was made without incident and they found Sixteen and Eighteen Troops and half of First Rangers waiting for them. Ishar Singh had ordered the other squad to try and establish visual contact with the reavers or meet the rangers, if the plan had fallen through.

They rested for the remainder of the day and performed minor maintenance on the tanks. The second squad of the First Rangers was sent to Seldon to establish contact with the

Fundamentalists and the Second Rangers established positions several miles ahead of the main body. The troops took turns herding the packhorses, riding point, rear and flanks.

Adam Silver of the first squad of the First Rangers rode in and reported that the reavers were on the move and were a week out. Jonathon had left one of the message stones at the first camp. The message was simply "Everything as planned". The tracking system had worked perfectly. He was sent out again on a fresh horse.

Robert Campbell rode in several hours later, just before camp was made. He reported that the Fundamentalists had occupied Seldon and were prepared for the reavers. "They have wagons in the streets and have plowed a bunch of fields to the north of town. Their leader, a guy named Rafael, said it was to slow the reavers down, if they got that far. He has a screening force to keep their scouts back so we are not spotted getting into position."

The expedition had three days to get into position.

The evening of the third day saw them within five miles of Seldon. They were using US38, making good time when one of the scouts appeared and brought with him Rafael and several men. One led the tanks and Eighteen Troop to their position at the end of the draw, another led Four and Sixteen Troops to the head of the draw, where they made camp in a grove of cottonwoods. First and Eleven Troops were led by another man to the south side of US83 and their position at the end of a draw. The rangers slipped off to form a ring around the whole area, after getting information on where the Fundamentalist forces were stationed. The scouts were to send a man to alert the Fundamentalists when the force swinging to the west had passed, either from the north or in the east.

The men of Five and Six Troops (Mechanized), set up poles over which camouflage netting was arranged to cover the tanks and hide the troopers from prying eyes. They covered

the solar cells with the armored shields that had been folded away while using the solar collectors. The tanks would use the old power systems during the upcoming battle.

A message had been retrieved every morning after the reavers had broken camp. All of the messages were encouraging. The last one was simply arrows coming from the top, right and left of the paper with numbers scribbled next to them. The number against the top was '50', the right '10' and the left '25'.

"This indicates the fifty reavers are coming from the north, ten to cut off escape at the triangle and twenty-five to come in from the west," observed Harry.

The others agreed and Rafael sent a man to inform Michael, who was well to the east to avoid any reaver patrols.

"Looks like this is it, boys," said Rafael shaking hands all around. "I better get back to my post. Good luck."

The next two days were nerve wracking. No fires were built and the MREs became tiresome. Boredom set in and the troopers were drilled on the tactics to be used in the upcoming fight.

"Finally," said Zach as the First Rangers sifted through the cottonwoods to the tanks. Jonathon had a grin on his face as he reported to Zach and Ron Buck. "They are coming. I have the last message from Paolo," he said, handing the message to Zach.

"'Dawn attack'," he read and looked up at Paolo. "Did you let Ishar Singh know?" At his nod, he continued, "Get a man across to Carl and let him know and follow his orders."

He looked at the message again and said, "Oh, wait. Send another man into town and let Rafael know. And tell them to act normally, like they were just out hunting or something. We don't know who is watching."

He ordered all of the men under the camouflage around the tanks. He hoped that the machines had adequate coverage. Through the netting, he watched the two men set off. The horses had been let loose in the draw with three men acting as herders. The reavers were supposed to think they were the animals from the town at pasture. This duty was coveted, since it allowed a fire and hot food to the guards.

Zach continually passed among the men telling them to get some sleep, but everyone was too keyed up to catch more than a catnap. An hour before dawn, he began shaking sleepers awake. They worked the kinks from their bodies and rechecked their weapons for the umpteenth time. Zach made sure that the snipers assigned to cover the remuda were ready. Zach and the other sniper had a short climb to the top of the ridge.

Zach surprised himself by saying a short prayer, something he hadn't done, seriously, in years. A stone struck near him, the signal from the ranger in the gillysuit at the top of the ridge that he had spotted the reavers. He could picture them riding down the draw, his rangers arranged on one side with blue bands around their arms. They had told 'Red' this was their gang colors.

Ron and the crews were ready in the tanks and the camouflage poles were being gripped in preparation to throwing them over the tanks and clearing the netting. The morning was cool, but everyone was sweating.

A rumble started on the other side of the ridge and the second rock dropped. "Move," Zach shouted. "Let's go, Bob," he yelled at Bob Tutwiler, his fellow sniper. The two scrambled up the slope as the first tank wheeled around the ridge and opened up with its machine gun and cannon. By the time Zach reached his position, two other tanks had appeared and the reavers'

mounts were bucking and plunging. He saw the rangers drop off their horses and form a defensive line to the east of the main body of reavers.

By the time the last tank had taken up its position and fired its first shot, the reaver attack had broken, there were clots of men and horses where the machine guns or shells had knocked them over.

Zach was looking for a man in a blue pea coat and red hair and beard. He saw him trying to rally his men and he fired a shot from his rifle. The first shot singed the rearing horse and his second flung the rider out of his saddle. After that, there was too much dust to acquire a clear target.

With their leader's death, the rest of the survivors panicked and fled. Eighteen Troop formed a mounted skirmish line and advanced up the valley at a trot in pursuit. As they came to downed reavers, they shot any wounded men or horses. The knot of scouts joined them.

From his vantage point, Zach could see the last of the drama when the reavers, most looking back over their shoulders for any signs of pursuit, were met with a concentrated volley from Four and Sixteen Troops. The retreat turned into a rout as the reavers broke and tried to scatter. Ishar Singh led a charge of Sixteen Troop. Four Troop continued to fire and were soon joined by Eighteen troop.

The reavers began throwing down their weapons and surrendering. Ishar Singh and his men continued the chase until all but three or four of the reavers had been brought down. These were allowed to run back to York and report to March.

As the prisoners were being gathered and disarmed, Zach spun with his binoculars and inspected the other theater across the road. The fighting there was pretty much over, too. He looked down the road and spotted several horsemen riding west.

He called down to the horse guards and directed them to give chase. He slid down the east side of the ridge and pulled eight or nine mounted troopers together and ordered them to ride to the head of the draw and try to cut off the fleeing reavers.

He looked around at the carnage and Ishar Singh found him, shoulders slumped, in the middle of a ring of dead horses and men. “Fine battle, huh?” he boomed. “A good morning’s work.” He looked satisfied. Zach thought he gloried in war and enjoyed every fight.

He told the Sikh about the four riders who escaped to the west and Ishar Singh called to his men and they took out in pursuit.

Zach grabbed a horse and headed towards town. He met Rafael and several men when he arrived. They asked him what had happened and, after he explained, they set off towards the killing ground up the northern draw. He turned his horse and spurred towards the southern battlefield. The carnage there was on a minor scale, compared to the other. The casualties to the troopers were also higher, since there were no tanks to break up the reaver formation. Zach found Matt helping Kurt Hochstettler, whose arm had been shattered. A bullet had entered at the wrist and traveled to the elbow, shattering it when it exited. Josh Blaine, the medic, was laying out bandages and splints, after giving Kurt a dose of morphine.

Matt joined Zach. He was pale and his hands were shaking. He didn’t take his eyes off Kurt as he said, “It wasn’t good, Zach. Something warned them and, though they weren’t expecting us to be so close, they were ready. We got a volley off, took out most of them, but the rest got off their own shots and we were pretty packed, so not many missed.

“We lost Pete Erkl and Seth Dussieu from the First, and it doesn’t look like Kurt is going to use that arm again. Michael O’Callaghan, Carlos Santiago, Tommy Z. and Steven Johnston

are gone from the Eleventh. Damn, I never could pronounce Tommy's last – Zwierzynski or something.

"How did it go with you?" he finally met Zach's gaze, but it was obvious he had been crying.

Zach ignored the emotion and replied, "I don't know. The tanks managed to break them up before they got more than a few shots off. We killed or took all of them, except for the few we let get away. A few escaped down the west road and Ishar Singh and some boys are after them."

He handed Matt his canteen and remounted his horse. While he was riding across the road, again, he saw Ishar Singh and his men returning. The five captured horses told the tale. He waited and met them and they turned north. The tanks had been moved to a defensive ring and the prisoners had been bound and were sitting in the circle formed by the machines. They found Michael and Raphael talking with Ron Buck. He had a cigar smoldering in the corner of his mouth and several more filled the pocket of his jacket. Carl was standing nearby with a bleak look on his face, a sheet of paper in his hand.

"Gentlemen," Zach said in the way of a greeting and dismounted. "Carl?"

"Eight dead, two out of it." He handed a paper to Zach who read the names, "Carson Soucie 18th, Frances Peck 4th, Ken Kelso 18th, Carlo Pelegrino 16th, Philo Revak 16th, Nand Singh 16th, Paolo Fuentes 4thR, Edvard Daniels 7thR." A few line farther down were the names of the seriously wounded, George Esperanza 4th and William O'Connor 4thR

"That's fourteen dead and three wounded."

Michael walked over and put a hand on Zach's shoulder. "I'm very sorry for your loss, Mr. Banducci. We will pray for them."

Zach thanked him and asked after his own casualties. “They were very light. The ten at the crossroads surrendered with few shots fired. We lost one man and had three wounded, none seriously. Thanks to you, they never reached the town and there were no casualties there.”

Zach nodded and they walked towards the prisoners. There were twenty-three of them. The medics were threading their way through them, doing what they could for the wounded. Zach turned towards Michael and said, “They’re yours.”

“Of course, we will take care of them.”

A couple of wagons came down the road. They were loaded with the women from town bearing hot food. Michael ordered Raphael to set up the food on the tailgates and have Guardian Angels take over the guard duty from Zach’s men.

While they were eating, Second Rangers arrived. They had been assigned to find the reavers’ camp where they left their supplies prior to the attack. Todd Spires was told to take the camp, if he could, or return for reinforcements, if he couldn’t. Todd jubilantly said, “They didn’t have any guards, at all.” He dismounted at the tables and chattered on about how the animals hadn’t been unloaded, just picketed. He abruptly stopped when Jimmy Williams kicked him under the table and hissed the casualty count at him.

Carl noticed this and immediately banged his cup on the table. “All right, let’s not turn this into a wake. We beat the bastards. You all did a great job. This should be a celebration, you clowns.”

The troopers looked startled and then began the healing process by celebrating their survival. The soon began telling stories about the fallen. Some were humorous, some embarrassing. Finally, they began to recount the battle and their parts in it.

When they were through eating, Zach and Carl approached Michael and said, “Their permanent camp is located near Emporia. We would like to take a couple of Troops and put paid to it.”

“I will send twenty-five of my men along to take assist and take charge of any prisoners, if you would like. There may be captives taken from St. Louis at the camp, also.

“I suggest that the prisoners be put to digging graves. The settlers in Seldon will be staying and I would like to get these bodies underground as soon as possible.”

“Good idea. I want one grave for our troopers, over there by the ridge on the slope. You can have a mass grave or burn the reavers, for all I care,” said Carl.

The prisoners were given tools and set to digging graves. There was grumbling, at first, but when Michael had the most vocal shot, the rest fell to with a will. The digging took the rest of that day and the next. Michael decided against burning the bodies of the horses, due to the lack of firewood, and had them buried. When they had finished, Michael held a ceremony over both graves, commending the bodies of the slain to the Lord.

Carl had taken two troops, one ranger troop and twenty-five of Michael’s men to deal with the rest of the reaver band. While they were away, the wounded recovered, the prisoners were executed and the town took on an air of normalcy. Michael rode off with his men, leaving Rafael in charge of Seldon.

When a family approached Zach with a request to join Jefferson, Rafael forbade any more fraternization between the groups. In face of the number of Zach’s force and the tanks, he gracelessly gave permission for the Winslow family to leave the settlement. Edward Winslow was assigned to Eleven Troop.

Mark Pecchia was made captain of Eleven Troop and Ed Tingle was assigned as leader for Fourth Rangers. Any other personnel shifts would wait until they returned to Mitchell.

As tensions built between the settlers and Jeffersonians, Carl returned with several wagons of booty. They had taken the reaver camp without a fight, in the face of the overwhelming force, and had taken twenty-eight prisoners and freed twelve captives. The town was looted and the loot divided, the twenty-five Guardian Angels taking their share and the captives with them. Before they left, however, the prisoners were executed and the corpses buried in a grave the prisoners had dug themselves.

Rather than overstay their welcome, Zach and Carl loaded up the rest of the gear and weapons from the battle at Seldon and rode away. The wounded had all recovered enough to ride and they reached Mitchell just as the first blizzard of the season descended on the mountains.

They reported to the Council on the success of the operation and held a ceremony for the dead. Ishar Singh and the men from Palo Duro and Edward Soletto and Eighteen Troop remained in Mitchell until the weather broke enough for them to proceed south.

Sarah welcomed Zach home and asked about the campaign after he had played with the children, eaten and slept. She had seen long ago that he had to talk about these things to excise the pain. He began, as usual, hesitantly, but soon the story erupted from him like fluid from a lanced boil. Afterwards, he just held her and the children, when they climbed up on his lap, contented with his family, the sorrow ebbing. She smoothed his grey-streaked hair, happy to be a part of his life. Just then, the baby kicked and she rubbed her belly and smiled.

Three weeks later, a delegation came to the Front Door. The delegate was taken to the Guest Ranch and his entourage was sent to the Mound. When Benton Robison, Gail O'Malley and Carl Smythe met with him, they recognized him as a lieutenant of General March.

"What do you want," Carl said, coldly. He didn't even ask for the man's name.

"The General has a proposition for you," was the nervous reply.

"What proposition?" asked Benton.

"The General suggests that we divide the country up. You take everything west of Wichita and he takes everything east. A fair division, since you have no use for the Darkies, Rag Heads or Jesus Freaks. Since you don't care what happens to them, why worry?

"We know you helped the freaks wipe out 'Red' and his gang, but we are willing to forget about that. Start over with a clean slate, sort of."

"Benton," Carl said. "Should we hang them or not?"

The widening eyes of the envoy demonstrated his nervousness. "I came under a flag of truce. You can't do anything to me."

"What? Do you think the United Nations will come after us? Or the World Court will call for troops?

"Listen, buddy," Carl said softly, leaning over the man. "You came here with no preconditions. You put yourself in our hands with no protection. You don't have enough men to free you, much less get out of our territory alive. Your sorry guard is sitting in a campsite we have mined with C4. A turn of a screw and that stuff goes off. Why in Hell would we honor an outdated code of conduct?"

Benton laid a hand on Carl's arm. "All right. You have given us the proposition. Here's our counter proposal. Disband your gang, take up farming, ranching, flower arranging, we don't

care. Stop provoking the Mahdists and the Fundamentalists. Free all captives and send them to New Africa, New Jerusalem or here, whichever they want.

“If we see any of you, we will shoot on sight. You want to communicate with us, there is a large rock on top of the Mound, leave your message there and tie a yellow flag around the tree next to it.

“The General does anything we don’t like and we will hunt you down, if we have to ally ourselves to the Mahdists to do it. We will continue to kill reavers wherever and whenever we find them. We wiped out ‘Red’, with the help of the Fundamentalists, and we will wipe out the General, too. ‘Red’ thought he could overwhelm us with bad language and horrid faces, we taught him and we will teach you. Do you understand?”

The man gave a surly nod and left. Carl felt like giving him a swift kick as he crossed in front of the angry, old soldier.

Gail said, giving his arm a squeeze, “Next time we will hang that verminous animal. And I will supply the rope.” Carl laughed as the grey-haired teacher walked to her carriage, trying to imagine her in the black hood of an executioner.

The Defense Council agreed that the General would be watched by a special group of rangers, specifically formed for that purpose. They would be designated the D Rangers, for detached. Their job would be to keep tabs on the General and identify potential targets for the Fundamentalists or the Jeffersonians.

The initial troop was a four-man team. Jimmy Fong was chose as captain. They set out on a rainy night to avoid any hostile eyes. They would make for Seldon and inform Rafael of their plan. They would work out a system of communication, but not tell him of theirs. When they could, they would recruit individuals or families and send them west.

Chapter 17

Events in the South

Winter 2045/2046

Another bunch of reavers gone. Not a bad thing, if there weren't the casualties. I'm sure glad Sarah is here to get me out of my funk. I hate to see the monument every time I come to town, but we have to remember the high price we have paid. There was some talk we should have stayed out of it, that it wasn't our problem. Ed handled these short-sighted people pretty well with the old quote from a hundred years ago about Person A doing nothing to protect a group because that group wasn't Person A's concern and eventually when 'they' came for Person A, there was no one to help him. We may not be on the best of terms with the Fundamentalists, but allowing them to get wiped out by March would make March that much stronger when he came for us. I hope that creating the Detached Rangers is a good idea. Jesus Santiago volunteered to avenge his brother. That could make him too reckless, but Jimmy and the others spoke up for him.

The baby is kicking. 'Doc' says its twins, again. We hadn't been gone from his office for five minutes when Sarah started talking about fielding a baseball team of our own. She blushed like a new bride when I suggested practicing for triplets. For someone who enjoys making love as much as she does, she is a little prude, at times.

Speaking of 'Doc', he reports that they are having an outbreak of something in Big Valley and wants to quarantine them until he and Steve Rosaia have a chance to get their hands around it. He admits that it might be a form of flu or a form of the plague. I'm leaving it in their hands. I've seen what the plague can do to a town. The puzzling thing is that the symptoms are like the flu, but don't respond to any treatments they have tried.

Carly Waggoner has started a company to repair the old phone system. The company wants to string wire for every home in Jefferson, not just the town offices. It's a single strand wire to a hand cranked phone, for now, but she has got her hands on an old fashioned switchboard that one of the expeditions found in a museum, somewhere. Now there is a big demand for the old phones. There are some aspects of civilization I would just as soon leave behind. I don't miss things like cell phones and viz phones.

Speak of the devil; there the phone goes, now.

Zach hurried into the War Room and met Ed limping out. He had taken a spill on a patch of ice and he had twisted his back. He was getting on and the fall had taken a lot out of him

"What's up?" he asked.

"New Africa volunteers are back," Ed replied as Zach fell into step with him, adjusting his pace to match the older man's, "They are in the Council Chambers. They got back last night, but Robison and I sent them home to their families. This meeting is the first report anyone has heard, outside their families, that is."

It was 8:30, the time scheduled for the Council to assemble. The Defense Committee was there, also. The families of the volunteers had also shown up, giving the impression that they dare not let the boys out of their sight. There was a haughty looking girl sitting with the Washington's that he didn't recognize. He absently noted that her coffee colored skin was perfect and her hair was done in an elaborate cross-cornrow style. There were colorful beads at the end of the braids and she wore a bright patterned dress that wrapped around her.

Benton Robison called the meeting to order and said, "This is an extraordinary session and I move we dispense with the normal order of business and get right to the Volunteer's report. All in favor signify by saying 'Aye'."

A chorus of 'ayes' responded to the motion. He didn't bother to ask for any dissent. He indicated the podium and sat.

William Ashanti rose and moved to the podium. There was a new scar on his forehead, puckered pink; the scab having just fallen off. He picked up the gavel and absently played with it as he began, "We traveled through the Sioux Confederacy." He seemed to be searching for words. "There wasn't any trouble, there. We reached Madison and joined some troops being thrown in a battle. We chased the Mahdists back and retook a couple of towns."

Again, he hesitated. He finally blurted out, "We fought until last month. We shouldn't have gone. All we were there for was to keep New Africans from getting killed by getting shot ourselves. We were always put in the front line. Eddie George got killed in early September. That Michael Turner ordered him specifically to scout the enemy. We found him the next day.

"James Johnson was killed last month. He was tending wounded when they overran us. He tried to pull a wounded man to safety and they cut him down. They were as disorganized as the Mahdists. Even their Lion of Allah couldn't keep the attacks coordinated. We fell back when he was directing the fight, but the other wing would crap out, because he was gone.

"Finally, he made a strong push along the lake and turned our flank. He pushed the New Africans out of Green Bay and almost to Wassau, Wisconsin. Michael Turner had to abandon Madison and fall back to Rochester, Minnesota.

"Then there was nothing. No pressure, no fighting. Six weeks ago it was as if the Mahdists just stopped. Turner sent out Patrice and George, with a squad, to see what was going on. They captured an outpost and brought back some Mahdists. They told us that the Lion of Allah had been recalled back to New Mecca. The rumor they had heard was that he had been assassinated. The Mahdists were demoralized.

“Jacob Jones, tried to get Michael to attack, but he thought it was a trap. He finally took a company of men and routed the Mahdists in front of us. This really sparked the New Africans, because more and more troops began to surge forward. We chased the Mahdists to the Wisconsin border and liberated Milwaukee.

“We retook that whole area in a week. The Mahdists, once they started running, didn’t stop. We took whole supply trains and headquarter camps. The whole staff of the Northern Jihadists. Killed every one of them. When we rested near Beloit, we heard that they had liberated a camp. It was filled with people that the Mahdists were shipping back to New Mecca. They were from all over. A lot were from east of Detroit.”

Tears were leaking from his eyes. He turned to the Council and nearly wailed, “He slaughtered everybody who wasn’t black. Whites, Orientals, Hispanics. Everyone. Jacob tried to stop him and Michael shot him. We talked to some men we knew who had been there. They saw it. Michael had gone blood mad. Jacob tried, uh, wanted to send them to us, but Michael just shot him.”

A stunned silence filled the room as Cassandra Moss took the weeping man away. Patrice reached out and gripped his friend’s shoulder and mounted the steps to the podium. “I guess I’ll take over. We talked it over that night and swore to head home. Gilliam didn’t want to. He, well, he had met someone and, and, he, um, married her.

“He was tight with Sam Kestral. We didn’t know how tight until my wife,” he waved to the woman sitting in the audience, “Clarice, sent word that we were to be arrested, tried and shot. We gathered what we could and got out of their, fast.

“We met Clarice and a couple of other families and moved west as fast as we could. They were close when we met a band of Sioux hunters. That guy we saved a couple of years ago from freezing was with them and they helped us escape and get here.”

“Well, that’s the story. We brought back five families. They want to stay with us. Um, I guess you should know that Clarice is Sam Kestral’s sister. That’s how she knew that we were in danger.

“Don’t get things wrong. There are a lot of good people in New Africa, but the worst of them took over. Michael Turner hates us, too. There is a lot of grumbling about him and his friends running everything. He only kept Jacob around because he was respected by everybody,” he finished, his Cajun cadence fading.

“What about Evelyn, Gilliam’s wife?” asked Gail O’Malley.

“Ma’am, we asked him that when he took that other woman to wife. He said that he didn’t want a skinny, white girl with a half breed in her belly.”

“Poor Evelyn,” Gail muttered.

Benton stood and addressed Clarice, “Mrs. Tourmond, you have our undying gratitude. We value all of the men that you saved. If there is anything we can do, don’t hesitate to ask.”

The startled look on her face and the smile of triumph on Patrice’s told everyone that she didn’t expect the warm welcome that her husband assured her she would receive. She sounded embarrassed when she thanked the Governor.

The Council ordered that the names of James Johnson and Eddie George be inscribed on the pillars in the square and they adjourned.

Zach was talking with Ed and Hans when a trooper broke in. “Zach, Zach,” he yelled. “It time. Sarah is coming in and ‘Doc’ is setting up the delivery room.

Zach sprinted to the hospital in time to meet Steve helping Sarah into the building. ‘Doc’ took her arm and looked at Zach and said, “Zach, you are not to come in. You are the biggest pain in the ass as an expectant father I have ever seen.” He looked at Ed limping across the street. “Ed, if he tries to come in, shoot him,” he said acidly. He slammed the door in Zach’s face.

Ed and Hans took his arms and walked him to the hotel bar where a celebration, of sorts, was taking place. The welcome home party and the celebration of the impending birth were combined and Zach had successive glasses of wine shoved into his hand.

Two hours later, one of the nurses found him and reported that the delivery was a success. The whole crowd cheered and followed Zach to the hospital. ‘Doc’ heard them coming and met them on the porch, facing them with his arms crossed.

“Keep it down. I have sick people in here. Go back to the bar, or better yet, go home.” He gave Zach a stony look. “I don’t suppose I can keep you out. You can come in, if you can do it under your own power, for a few minutes.” He turned away and muttered, “Congratulations. Twin boys.”

Zach took a deep breath and gripped the stair railing. He missed the bottom step on his first attempt, but managed to enter the hospital. The rest of the crowd drifted off, some back to the bar and the rest towards home.

When Zach entered his wife’s room, she had her hair combed and a small bundle in each arm. Her wide smile and sparkling eyes gave proof to her great joy. ‘Doc’ was taking her pulse and looked up. “Glad you could make it,” he said, as if he had not just seen him outside. “Easy delivery, as usual. Don’t stay too long.”

Zach figured that he was there only to give him a hard time. The old doctor hadn't forgiven him for the events at the rest area, when he had executed the Mahdists. He walked to the bedside, weaving slightly.

"Been celebrating, I see," said Sarah.

"Just one or two, dear. How are you feeling, anyway? Let me see what the newest rug rats look like."

"Oh, Zach. They are not rats, they're your sons, Ed and Jacob, like we discussed."

Zach started to pick up Jacob, but Sarah gently dissuaded him and considering his condition, he simply spread the blanket and admired the red-faced, pointy-headed child. He looked at Ed and sat back. "Ugly little things, aren't they? Must take after my side of the family. Should we put them back until they get some looks?"

"Right. Except this time you carry them," laughed Sarah. He always made the same comment when he first saw his children.

"In that case, wrap them up, clerk, we'll take them."

Mrs. White, the nurse, came in and shooed Zach out, saying that the mother had to feed the babies and then rest. Zach stood on the porch, taking deep breaths and trying to decide what to do next.

He glanced over when Ed cleared his throat. Ed was sitting on one of the porch chairs, smoking his pipe. Now that they had an uneasy truce with New Jerusalem, he got all of the tobacco he wanted. He nodded to another chair and Zach sat down. Ed handed him two cigars and said, "You're supposed to provide those, but what the hell. How are the kids and Sarah?"

"They are just fine. She looks ready to plow the south forty. The kids look like newborns, red and pointy-headed.

“By-the-way, your namesake is the ugly one,” he said while lighting a cigar.

He blew a smoke ring and waited for Ed to get to the point. Ed never just sat around without a book or something to do. He was waiting for Zach and there was a reason, an important reason, for it.

“I don’t like the situation, Zach. Things are getting worse and worse. Michael Turner in New Africa is murdering based on race and hates us with a passion. Pastor Simmons in New Jerusalem hates us and they only tolerate us because of the reavers. General March has a good reason to hate us and does. The Mahdi in New Mecca, well you know what he thinks of us. The Aztecs have no love for us; we have embarrassed them several times.

“The Sioux Confederation tolerates us, but don’t allow non-Indians on land they claim, the same with the Mormons. We have a much better relation with them, but, if you are not a Mormon, you are only welcome to travel through or trade. Short’s people are the same as the Sioux, though I don’t think there ever were any non-Indians settled on their land that survived.

“Our only allies are the West Coast states. Even there, Washington and Columbia had a small fracas, so we can’t even get along with ourselves.

“The question is: what do we do now? Things are going to blow up, somewhere. The Mahdists don’t look to be able to beat the New Africans. Will they turn on us? The Fundamentalists? Lick their wounds?

“If the Fundamentalists fall apart, will March be able to set up in their territory and start his grand plan? How long before he targets us?

“If the Reavers fall apart, will the Fundamentalists solidify and go after the Mahdists? After us? After the Israelis?

“If the New Africans can continue their drive, will they scatter the Mahdists? If they do, will they start a war with the Fundamentalists? Us?”

“And what is on the east coast? Why haven’t we heard anything? I know that, with Boston, New York, Washington and Atlanta gone, that left a wide swathe in this country radioactive. But North Carolina, South Carolina, Maine, Pennsylvania and parts of others. Someone survived. Where are they?”

Zach had smoked his cigar down to a stub while Ed got his concerns out of his system. He crushed out the remains of his cigar in a chipped ceramic ashtray with a popular beer logo and said, “Ed, we can worry about it till the cows come home. However, old son, we can’t do anything until it hits the fan. Let’s get the defense committee together and draw up some contingency plans.

“You’ve got something on your mind, other than this. Spill.”

“Hell,” he spat. “Zach, I’m dying. The Doc says he thinks its cancer.” He pulled his heavy coat around himself against the freshening wind. “I don’t mind dying, it’s not that. I just hate to think that all of the work we’ve done will come on down. Now, don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I think you and Carl are going to screw it up. You and the rest of the committee are doing a great job. It’s that you may not be able to face the size of the problem.

“Any group out there outnumber us. We may have the advantage of the tanks and the boys, but someday they are going to let a competent general take over and watch out. That Michael, he’s smart. He could do it. It takes a long time to build a soldier and we don’t have the base like the others do. We have about eighteen hundred people. Even the Mormons and the Sioux have more. And if we start spreading into the lowlands, then we have the same problem as

the Fundies. We are sitting ducks on our small farms and ranches and towns for everybody around. Even if we set up more colonies, that wouldn't make up the numbers."

Zach ignored the news about the cancer. To Ed that was a non-issue. He sat for a few minutes and, finally, said. "Ed, we can't live future generation's lives for them. All we can do is leave them better off, better trained to solve the problems of their day.

"If the Mahdists or Aztecs or Fundies come, we will have to deal with them at the time. We may fall, but we will know we tried. Before that last fight, we will get our families away, if we can. You know, we are in the same position as the Zealots on top of Masada, the same as the colony at Roanoke, the same as those buffalo hunters at Adobe Walls. Some won, some didn't, but they all did their best. It's when we give up and simply go off like cattle to our deaths that we have failed the next generation. The Jews learned that the hard way.

"Damn, Ed, now I'm sober. That's a cruel thing to do to a man on the day his children are born. Let's go over to the bar and I'll buy you a drink."

"Thank, Zach, for everything. I needed somebody to tell and to get this stuff off my chest. You're right; tomorrow we start working on those contingency plans.

"As for the drink? You're on, let's go." He levered himself off the chair and carefully descended the stairs. As Zach followed him, he wondered just how old Ed was. For the first time, he looked behind the strength of character and the iron will and saw the lined face and white, thinning hair. Seventy or seventy-five or, even, eighty, they were all possible. Zach shrugged and pulled his collar around his ears and gripped the older man's elbow and helped him across the street. He fleetingly thought if it was fair to keep him away from Asta, working.

The next day, when Zach drove back to pick Sarah and the babies up, there was a small crowd at the Communications Center. Zach was torn between finding out what was happening

and getting Sarah. Good sense won out and he stopped the wagon in front of the hospital. His family was ready and had been watching him drive into town. He silently said a prayer of thanks for not being too tempted to investigate the crowd.

“Lucky, weren’t you?” smiled Sarah. “I expected your curiosity to win out.”

“And leave you and the children waiting? Not on your life,” he replied with a cherubic air.

Sarah rolled her eyes as he handed her up to the seat and wrapped a buffalo robe around her legs. There had been a light fall of snow and a cold wind was whistling around the buildings and along the streets. The babies, bundled in robes, were handed up to her and Zach turned the wagon and drove out of town.

After he got Sarah and the babies settled, he called the Communications Center. Grace Santini answered and, after the appropriate small talk, he asked what the fuss was about earlier. She said they had a message from Palo Duro that the Aztecs were actively moving into the San Antonio area. “It looks like they are moving in settlers. Ishar Singh is taking a patrol out to look into it. Also, the Israelis have radioed that they want to pick up Carl’s people in a month. That was yesterday. Jasper Poole wants us to send down a couple of Troops to get them past the Aztecs.

“Somehow, it got around that the Aztecs were attacking. You know how it goes with rumors. Ed wants to meet with the Defense Council tomorrow at 8:00am. Can you make it?

“Yeah, I’ll be there. When did this message from Palo Duro come in?”

“After 7:00 pm last night. From Gunnison. The air was really clear and reception was great.”

Zach rang off and got out a couple of maps and spread them on the table. William and Charles came over and wanted to help, so Zach set each one on a high chair so they could watch. Zach traced a path from Amarillo through Dallas, circling wide east, to Houston. He used a measuring wheel to get the distance.

When he whistled, William and Charles both blew, trying to emulate him. After wiping the spit off the maps, he folded them up and set the boys down and wrestled with them for an hour until supper was ready.

The next morning, he rode into town to attend the meeting. By the time he arrived, Ed had brewed a pot of coffee and Hans, Jerry, Carl and Harry were sipping the strong blend of coffee and herbs. The coffee was traded from the Aztecs, who had a steady supply of it. There was a regular patrol out of El Paso that met a regular patrol out of Palo Duro and traded fresh fruit and vegetables for coffee. Both commands knew what was going on, but ignored the situation. The herbs were local and stretched the coffee out. Zach felt that he would prefer that they ran out of coffee before using the herbs, but had been overruled.

Jimmy was out with Ten Troop on patrol and would not return until the following day.

Ed called the meeting to order and read the communication from Palo Duro. He opened the floor for comments, without offering his own.

Zach pulled his maps out and spread them on the conference table. He traced the path he proposed the expedition to take to Houston and gave his estimate of the number of days the trip would take. "We will be escorting, what, a dozen families, with the usual wagon and supplies and there are Aztecs in San Antonio and, maybe, Austin. The commander there may not be as tolerant as his counterpart in El Paso.

“We really need to get Ishar Singh’s report about the size of the Aztec force, how aggressive it is about patrolling and if this settlement thing is heading beyond San Antonio.

“You know, gentlemen, that we have to nip this in the bud. If this is a migration, the Palo Duro settlement is in big trouble. So far, they have been pretty isolated and, therefore, protected by distance, when the Aztecs were at the Rio Grande.”

The others nodded their heads. He had voiced their thoughts.

Ed cleared his throat and said, “Let’s take this one thing at a time. The first task before us is getting the Jews to the coast. I agree with Zach, we have to have Ishar Singh’s report. In the meantime, I think we should put Two, Ten and Thirteen Troops on alert. Also, Third Rangers. We know that Ishar Singh will want to use one of his troops and rangers, so we can count on him for that.

“Harry, I want you to go with them. Jerry, you, too. I would like every troop to have an advisor. Zach, you will have to clear it with Sarah,” and they all laughed. “I will lay out the tentative plan to the Council so they have an idea what is coming. I hate that this will be in the middle of winter, but that may work in our favor, since the Aztecs will tend to stay at home in the cold.

“All right, that’s it for today. Alert your troops, or in Zach’s case, his wife and I will try to get in communication with Palo Duro. We’ll meet again tomorrow.”

Zach picked up a couple of things at the commissary and met John Singleton as he left. They exchanged pleasantries and Zach asked him on the progress he was making retrofitting the new solar engine into the town’s existing vehicles.

“Oh, I have three pickup trucks and three tractors finished. We are working on a combine, now. Robison wants to get it ready for next harvest,” he said as he reached into his pocket and absentmindedly extracted a pen with which he began fiddling.

“How long would it take you to convert a couple of deuce and a halves?” Zach queried.

“About a week, I should think. Why?” he asked, but immediately answered his own question. “You want them to move Carl Weisenfeld’s people. Sure, we can get them done in a week, easy.”

Zach thanked him and drove home to talk with Sarah. He rehearsed what he would tell her, between guilty knowledge that she was right when she said it wasn’t necessary for him to go.

When he pulled up in the yard, his kit was sitting on the bench by the side of the door.

No sure if that meant ‘Don’t come home’ or ‘You have my permission’, he put the wagon away and gingerly stepped through the doorway. One of the new twins was wailing in the bedroom, so he sat down and chatted with Maizey.

Her attitude told him that there had been a discussion about him and he had not gained any points in Maizey’s eyes. Sarah came in with a twin on each arm. Zach took one and checked the wristband and saw that he had Ed. Maizey went to the stove to check on lunch, disapproval in her every line.

“You know,” Sarah said, “if you get killed, I won’t speak to you again.” She laughed, but there were unshed tears in her eyes.

Zach put his free arm around her and kissed the top of her head when she dropped it against his chest. “You know that I won’t go, if you don’t want me to.

“Of course I don’t want you to. But, if I say no, it would break your heart. You would pace and worry every minute those boys were gone. You may not realize it, but those boys are every bit of your family as William, George, Sarah, Andy, Ed and Jacob. Just don’t, oh, you know.” She clutched the back of his shirt fiercely.

Zach simply kissed her again and held her tight.

He spent the rest of the day in the house, playing with the kids, talking with Sarah and carving toys for the children. He was learning from Harry, but his horses still looked like lopsided camels. However, the children liked them so he couldn’t call himself a failure.

Benton Robison, representing the Council, joined the next morning’s meeting. The Council had met in extraordinary session and agreed on sending the expedition. He was at the Defense Council meeting as an observer only.

Ed called the meeting to order and recognized Benton’s presence. “I got through to Gunnison and they got through to Palo Duro. Gregory Bronski had sent a squad and a radio towards Palo Duro and that completed the link.

“Ishar Singh sends this: ‘A hundred families. Fifty troops. No movement north.’” He put down the communication and looked around. “I think that two troops will be enough.”

“Ed, are we going to do anything about the Aztecs?” asked Jimmy.

“Not until Carl and company are on the boat. Then, our Carl will make the call. It will be January. Do you want to displace a hundred families in the middle of winter?”

“No,” answered Zach, “but, if we don’t do it now, we will have to mount another expedition in the spring. By then, we may have to fight more of them.”

“Wait a minute,” interjected Harry. “If there is a campaign mounted in the spring, we could use two troops from Gunnison and the two from Palo Duro. That would use the closest troops. There really isn’t any reason to keep pulling troops from Mitchell.”

Jerry took a sip of coffee and made a face. “Actually, I have been thinking about this for a long time, I think that we should move one of the troops from Mitchell to Gunnison or Palo Duro, permanently. That would leave five here. Maybe, we should move one each to Palo Duro and Gunnison.” He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table, cradling the mug in his hands. “Palo Duro is the weak point in our chain of settlements. The rest have strong defensive positions and are near enough to be relieved fairly quickly. Gunnison is the central anchor. If we put a strong force in Gunnison, we can send troops from two points.”

Ed looked in the roster for a few minutes. “Gunnison has Nineteen, Twenty and Auxiliary E Troops as permanents. Eighteen has been stationed there since day one. If we send down Thirteen, that would give them close to a hundred troopers, with two tanks and a couple of the pickups, they would have more than we had in the beginning.

“The only question is: is there enough support for them? I would hate to have to keep carting supplies in. It’s both a hassle and a security risk.”

Ron, who had been cleaning his fingernails and listening with only half an ear, looked up. Ed grinned and said, “Thought that would get your attention, Ron.”

“Well, we’ve been expecting it for a while. There was no reason to keep all four tanks here, especially with Gunnison being a strongpoint. Paul and Sixth Troop will relocate to Gunnison. Just so you know, we don’t think the tanks should be stationed in Palo Duro. The canyon is too limiting and the settlement is too vulnerable. I would hate to have the Aztecs or, worse, reavers get their hands on one or two of them.”

“Fine,” said Ed. “Now, about supplies.”

“Gunnison is bigger than the first settlement,” said Zach. “I don’t think there is anything to worry about in regards to supplies, if there isn’t a drought or something. From what I have heard, most of the Kansans have moved out of the community housing and built their own homes. The community housing could be used as barracks until something else is found.

They discussed the redistribution of manpower. Jimmy brought up the need for a Spanish-speaking Ranger Troop, now that the Aztecs were coming on the radar again. He argued that a Spanish-speaking troop would be more effective working at the border, both for interrogation and intelligence gathering. The committee sent off a message to Gunnison and asked him to relay it to Palo Duro with the request for Spanish-speaking Rangers.

Zach brought up his conversation with John Singleton and they agreed to send four trucks to carry supplies and the families of the relocating troops to Rio Grande and Gunnison. They would leave two at Gunnison and drive the other two to Palo Duro, along with two pickups with machine guns. If feasible, they would use the two trucks to carry the Jews’ belongings to the coast.

They decided to wait before sending another troop to Palo Duro until they had talked the situation over with Bill Daniels and Jasper Poole. They agreed to permanently station Thirteen and Eighteen Troops to Gunnison, along with the two tanks, two machine-gun mounted pickups and two more pieces of artillery.

The troops and families were to set out in two weeks or when the trucks were ready. Ron and Paul divided the spare parts and shuffled some of the crews between Fifth and Sixth Troops. Word was sent to Palo Duro to get Carl’s people ready and to inform the Israelis of the meeting.

John Singleton and his crew worked round the clock to get the vehicles ready. They were parked in front of the town hall on the twelfth day. Supplies and household goods were packed, last minute goodbyes said and they started out the next morning.

Chapter 18

To The Gulf

Winter 2045/2046

Finally! The Jews are getting a new homeland. I wonder how they found Cuba? A little different from the Holy Land, I'll bet. There's not a lot of jungle near Jerusalem. 'Doc' is sending along some anti-malarial drugs. We sure don't need them in the Rockies. From the last winter, there is no fear about it being tropical in Mitchell any time soon.

It sure is good news about Singleton's engine modifications. Lord knows there are enough vehicles sitting around that can be converted. The downside, according to William Smith, is that he will start having to store spare parts for the cars, trucks, tractors and other machinery. We don't have any manufacturing capacity that can come up with a new air conditioning unit or a carburetor. John has suggested that we convert a common set of vehicles and store parts for them. There goes my dream of tooling around in a Lamborghini.

When Sarah expressed concern that our farm would become obsolete, I assured her that there would always be a need for beef and dairy cattle and the horses and mules would be needed in the logging operations or in the mountains where the roads were poor. Besides, a lot of people liked to ride and the horses were more dependable. When the sky was overcast, the collectors weren't very efficient and averaged about fifty miles on the battery. In winter, even if the roads were passable, the new vehicles weren't all that practical.

Third Rangers had left the night before to scout the road and Two Troop set out before dawn. The main party followed as the rising sun painted the sky. The weather was clear and cold and breathing sent plumes of vapor from every nostril, human and animal. Ten Troop surrounded the trucks, wagons and herd of cattle, horses, llamas and sheep. Herd dogs,

exuberant in the cold, barked with excitement, starting their charges. Thirteen Troop left a half-hour later.

The trip to the Rio Grande cutoff was uneventful. Herders took possession of their allotment of the herd. The rest of the train continued on towards Gunnison.

There was a minor skirmish with a small party of reavers, but the troopers came through with only minor injuries. They took possession of several horses and weapons. The reavers were hung and left as a warning. As Ten Troop was riding away from the scene of the fracas, they met several of John Short's tribe. The Cherokees stayed with them until the train met John at the usual turnoff.

The old man looked the same, aged and timeless. He sat straight in the saddle and had the same twinkle in his eye. Zach wondered, again, what he would look like angry. After exchanging tobacco and lighting up his homemade cigarette, he said, "There are Aztecs above the Rio Grande."

"Yes, there are," returned Carl.

The silence grew until the old Cherokee laughed. He sucked smoke down his windpipe and his nephews pounded on his back. "You would make a good horse trader. Are you going to do anything about them, then?"

"Grandfather, they are on land the Indians claim. They are not bothering us. Why should we have any animosity towards them?" smiled Carl.

"Let's cut the hokey dialogue from bad cowboy and Indian movies," the old chief said. "They are a danger to both of us. We don't have the manpower or the weapons to kick them out of San Antonio. You know that if they build a settlement that close to Palo Duro, they will,

eventually, start bumping heads with you. So, are you going to cut the head off the snake or not?"

Carl chuckled. "We have to get the Jews to the coast to meet their people, first. Then we will do a little scouting and see what there is to see. As has been pointed out, we are not too anxious to send a hundred families into the wilderness." Before Short could interrupt, Carl continued, "However, we don't want them camping on our doorstep, either."

The two groups parted with a promise by the Cherokees to keep an eye on the Aztecs until Carl was finished with the Jews. Several days later, the trucks pulled into the parking lot of the Visitor's Center amid a pelting rain. The horses were quickly led into the barns; the passengers dropped off at the hotel and Carl, Zach, Jimmy Pinder, Hans Minkema and Harry McGregor entered the Visitor's Center to meet with William Daniels.

He was sitting at his desk drinking coffee and eating a sandwich. When the five men entered, he jumped to his feet and came around his cluttered desk to shake hands. "Sorry, I thought the weather would hold you up for another couple of hours. I'm trying to get a hand on this paperwork and stay out of Steinman's way. I will never be as happy as when he is out of my hair."

"Pesterable, huh?" said Jimmy, laconically.

"If you mean a pain in the rear, then you are right. After he heard that you were coming and he was going to be gone in a couple of weeks, he has been riding me about his 'share' of the supplies and equipment. Those Israelis had better bring the Queen Elizabeth II if he gets everything he has asked for. Hell, we will have to beg back to Gunnison. We won't have a horse or a pair of shoes between us."

“Didn’t you tell him the rules about someone leaving? A week’s worth of food, a horse and wagon, a rifle and a box of ammunition. Other than that you or Jasper is the arbiter of anything else.”

William looked exasperated and sat back down, “Sure I did. Went over like a lead balloon. Says that he is not subject to our rules, since he was just tagging along to get to Florida. In fact, he has the gall to insinuate that we owe him for the work they have done.”

Zach was about to say something when the topic of conversation marched into the room. He had a fierce look on his face and his hands were fists. Carl was following behind, trying to calm the bigger man down. Samuel stormed to the desk and planted both fists squarely on the desk.

“What is this about you keeping our horses? Those animals are ours and I demand you release them to us, now.”

“Hello, Carl,” interrupted Zach. “Are you ready to shove off, tomorrow?”

“Hello, Zach. Yes. The people are ready,” he replied. “Some have been packed since the message arrived. Others, well, there is a small question or two.” He looked at Samuel as he said this.

“No, Rabbi. There is no question or two. We are owed and I will have my possessions.”

Zach turned to Samuel. “What possessions are in question, Steinman?”

A smile of triumph crossed the man’s face. He pulled out a many-paged list from his pocket and flourished it in front of Zach’s face. “We calculate that we have been working, and been unpaid, for many months. Our young men have gone to war and died for Palo Duro. We calculate that we are owed a wagon of goods for each family, horses to draw them, five cows, three llamas, ten sheep and a crate of chickens.”

“Is that all?” asked Zach, mildly.

“No. Each adult is to be given a rifle, a pistol and a case of ammunition. Of their choice,” he hastily added.

Zach took the list and a pen from William’s desk and walked to a corner table and did some calculations. He looked through the list, made some marks on it and returned to the tableau around the desk.

“By my calculations, you and your people owe forty hours each to pay for the food, ammunition, animals and miscellaneous equipment. Another two hundred hours for the protection services, minus time for the troopers you provided. There will be another three hundred hours for the weapons, supplies, animals and wagons you want.

“Now, that leaves you with five hundred and forty hours of public service before you will be allowed to leave.”

Samuel sputtered, his face going red. William reveled in the sight of Samuel Steinman speechless. Before he could explode, Zach continued, “All right, now that we have both made ridiculous requests, let’s start over. You have done for us and we have done for you. Yours were killed for the community and ours were killed setting up the communication with the Israelis. You will get what anyone else gets, a weeks worth of supplies, a wagon and horses, weapons and you can keep your personal household goods.

“Samuel, that is all you will get. So stop being an ass and go pack.”

He turned to Carl, “Is that fair, Rabbi? Should we owe you anything else? You are a reasonable man and I will listen to your requests with respect, but without Samuel.”

Steinman stormed out of the office. “Thank you, Zach,” the old rabbi said. “He has been a trial in these times. None of the rest of us think he is right, but what can one do against a man who will not listen? I ask you?”

He left, shaking his head. Zach turned back to the desk and they broke out in laughter. William wiped his eyes, “I thought he was going to have a heart attack. I guess I shouldn’t have been so politically correct, all of this time.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent in discussing the route. Ishar Singh came in from leading a patrol to scout the Aztecs, rainwater dripping from his cape and turban. He greeted them with his usual exuberance and gave each one a bear hug. He agreed with the plan, as long as his troop was assigned the flank to the south of Dallas. He would take the Seventh and Ninth Rangers, Two, Ten and Seventeen Troops. Thirteen Troop and Third Rangers would accompany the train and provide cover and protection. Eighteen and Nineteen Troops would remain in Palo Duro and sweep south towards San Antonio.

Their route to Galveston Bay would take them to Greenville to Emory, south through Tyler, Palestine, Crockett, Trinity, Riverside and Willis to La Porte. The inclusion of Palestine raised a few eyebrows and chuckles.

“That will bring a reaction from Samuel,” Jimmy Pinder noted.

Ishar Singh refused the pickups, saying that they would have to stick to roads and slow him down. Rather, they should go with the main body that would be on roads, anyway. Referencing General Custer’s statement about the Gatling guns, Carl acceded. The meeting broke up and Zach and Carl with William Daniels to find Jasper Poole.

In the mayor’s office, they discussed the addition of an additional troop being stationed at Palo Duro. William approved of the idea saying, “Palo Duro was a bigger mouthful than we first

thought. Ishar Singh and the two troops here have done a great job, but they are stretched pretty thin with the Aztecs setting up so close. We have been running more patrols and are wearing out the men and horses.”

“Then send a squad and a radio out towards Gunnison and have them relay the message to Mitchell to have Ed relocate another Mitchell troop to Palo Duro,” said Carl. “We have discussed this and he will know what to do.”

The next several days were spent readying the travelers and saying good-bye. Early on the morning of the third day, Ishar Singh set out towards the south and the train headed towards Greenville. Day followed day as the train moved through the Texas countryside. The devastation was thorough. Town after town, ranch after ranch, farm after farm was a scene of desolation. When they found remains, they paused long enough to bury them.

Third Rangers spotted small bands of reavers, which were quickly dispatched. Over the first week on the road, they freed a dozen ‘skags’ and collected eight families that had been overlooked by the reavers and were eager to join the larger group at Palo Duro. Several days were wasted while the newcomers packed their belongings. The food supplies had to be supplemented by hunting, which slowed the expedition even more.

Samuel was getting impatient and even Carl was starting to worry about the delays. The radio didn’t pick up any signal, except for Ishar Singh’s nightly report. They had met some, smaller reaver bands, also and had gathered up three ‘skags’ and two families. They had seen several groups of riders in the distance, but had not made contact. He assumed that they were Aztecs.

The plan called for Ishar Singh to wait in Palestine. They received the message that he had arrived when they were passing the burned out ruins of Franklin. Carl Smyth was nervous

about traveling through the hill country along Texas 155 and he sent a squad of the Rangers to the top of Daly Mountain to set up a lookout. The other squad flanked the column.

As they took their noon break at Pert, Dooby Finkle radioed a report that there was smoke in a small valley to the east, along the Neches River. Carl ordered them to stay put and keep an eye out. Next, he radioed Ishar Singh and informed him of the sighting and requested that he send someone to investigate. Ishar said he would send out Two Troop and Seven Rangers. Carl ordered Thirteen Troop to form a perimeter and they settled down to wait.

They received another report from Dooby an hour later that he saw Ishar's troops moving along U.S. 79. Carl ordered the train to get moving. They met a squad from Seventeen Troop, which escorted them into Palestine. As expected, Samuel was offended that they were in a location named after the state created by their fiercest enemies. Harry McGregor had joined Dooby on the top of Daly Mountain and reported that an all-clear signal had been received from Hans Minkema via mirrors.

Carl ordered Harry to report to the Palestine camp. An hour later, Hans and his troopers arrived in the company of five men. They were all carved from the same mold, tall, lean, with long faces and short beards. They carried an astounding array of weapons. Most has several handguns slung around their waists or in shoulder holsters. Each had a K-bar knife in a sheath around his slim hips. They carried M34 combat rifles or combat shotguns and had bandoliers of ammunition crossing their chests. Hans introduced them as the Cavenaughes.

The oldest one, his weapon across his shoulders, one arm draped over the stock and the other over the barrel, nodded towards the Sikhs and asked, "Ragheads?"

"Sikhs," replied Zach, just as laconically.

The man removed his weapon from his shoulders and stuck out his hand to Zach. “John Cavanaugh. These are my sons, James and Michael, and my nephews, Paul and Elton. We have a place over in the Neches Valley.”

Carl introduced his party and they shook hands all around and Carl led them into a half ruined building in which tables and assorted chairs had been assembled. When they were all seated, Hans said, “We found the source of smoke that Dooby spotted. It seems that a brush burning fire had gotten out of hand and burned into some green vegetation.”

John shot an accusatory look at Elton, who turned bright red.

“We kind of surprised them. I spoke with John, here, and he said he wanted to meet you, Carl.”

Carl explained who they were and what they were doing. His narrative, even the short version, took almost an hour, but during that time, John and his sons and nephews listened closely. When he had finished, John asked a few questions and took his boys aside and spoke with them quietly. Carl ordered camp made and told his staff that they would spend the night here.

John returned and sat, again. He combed his beard with the fingers of his left hand and began his story. His brother had a ranch in the valley before the troubles. John and his family had been visiting when the bombs went off. They stayed when they realized that their home in Dallas had been destroyed. “There are twenty-five of us, there were more, but they didn’t make it. My oldest boy had a woman he was seeing and we couldn’t convince him not to go back home and we haven’t heard from him since. A couple of the children died. We rode out the sickness and the troubled times by keeping our heads down and a sharp eye out.

“We have been surviving on what we raise and what we managed to store up before the, what, reavers you call them, burned everything. We got our weapons from a local armory, so we have plenty of firepower.

“Talking to your man, Hans, he gave us a big picture view of what is going on, you gave us more. The boys and I can speak for the whole clan and we would like to join you, if that is all right. The reaver gangs are becoming larger and more organized and it is only a matter of time until we let down our guard at the wrong time,” he finished and leaned back in his chair.

Carl shrugged his shoulders and said, “You and your people are welcome to join us. Our first task is getting the Jewish contingent to the coast and joining them with the Israelis. You have your choice of any of the settlements, from Palo Duro to Mitchell, near Denver.

“I do have to warn you that we will probably have trouble with the Aztecs, the Mexicans call themselves that, now. They are setting themselves up in San Antonio and we think they should stay closer to the Rio Grande. If you don’t want to get involved with that, I understand.”

John gave a little snort. “I had an ancestor that fought at the Alamo. What he did a couple of hundred years ago, I can do today. Course, I’m hoping the outcome will be a little different.”

“How long will it take you to pack up?” asked Harry.

“Quite a while, actually. We have quite a few things we need to take along.”

When pressed about his clan’s belongings, John explained that he and his family knew that something bad was happening, especially when the flu started felling large numbers of the population. His wife, a nurse, knew that the number of unburied bodies would lead to other, more virulent diseases, like dysentery and cholera. Beside which no one knew if the bombs would be followed up with biological or chemical attacks. David and Paul were members of the

National Guard unit in the area and they were in possession of the keys to the armory, having been the Officers of the Day on that fateful afternoon.

Since the phones were out, John, William and their remaining sons had driven to the armory to assure that the boys were all right. They had remained at their posts, but had sent the rest of their men home. When the enormity of the situation became known, they realized that the arms need to be safeguarded. The Cavanaugh's started loading all of the trucks in the motor pool and transporting everything portable to the farm. They stored it in the barns and returned for more, eventually making six trips with ten trucks in each convoy. The list of items was staggering.

"We don't have the ability to take everything with us, John," said Carl. "Even if you had the trucks and they had the fuel, the sheer volume is immense."

"Yeah, there's a lot of stuff there, but we should be taking as much as possible, shouldn't we?" he returned with a grin.

Hans broke in with, "John, tell me how you, a Texas National Guard unit, managed to get the latest in weaponry. M34 Combat Rifles are frontline weapons. We fought hard to get them when we were on the border. From what you have described, you got the best of everything and then some."

John smiled again. "We had the head of the Military Appropriations Committee representing this district in Congress. The Pentagon was more than eager to do him a good turn or two. When those frontline units Hans was talking about had been rearmed with the M34 Rifle, the next batch was destined for the Guard and Reserve. We got one of the only shipments of the latest weapons in the country."

A council of war was called. They decided that the munitions at the Cavanaugh farm were worth the risk of splitting their forces. Ishar Singh, the Seventh Rangers, Two and Ten Troops were to remain, with the refugees they had picked up, and help sort through the mounds of equipment and load the trucks preparatory to heading back to Palo Duro. The rest of the expedition would continue on towards La Porte and deliver the Jews to the Israelis. On their way back, they would rejoin forces, load the wagons and head for home.

Carl pushed hard for Houston, allowing little rest and driving the horses hard. They started out early each morning and pressed on late into the evening. When there was grumbling about the pace, he ignored them. Only to Zach would he express his concern about the munitions. Both knew how important they were to the survival of Jefferson.

A howling north wind swirled around them as they reached their destination. The town had been burned and tents were hastily erected and the radio call went out. It was answered immediately and the Israelis promised to land the next day, if the swells subsided.

The next morning, the Jews were eagerly waiting on the dock when the ship hove into view. There were murmurs of disappointment when the size of the vessel became apparent. The steam craft pulled up to the dock and a smartly uniformed officer leapt off, calling for Carl. He ignored the crowd and marched towards the main tent. He introduced himself, but was interrupted by Samuel pushing his way into the tent and demanding to be heard.

Zach immediately called several troopers and ordered them to clear the tent of excess personnel and keep it clear. He also ordered a cordon of guards be placed around the tent. When order had been restored, he asked a trooper to request the presence of Carl Weisenfeld.

Coffee and tea were offered while they waited for Carl and they questioned the Israeli on the success of the Cuban expedition. He informed them that they had landed in Havana harbor

and encountered no resistance, human resistance, that is. There seemed to be a great many packs of feral dogs. All the bones they found had the look of being chewed. At first they thought that cannibalism had broken out, but, with the first attack of a pack of animals, they decided that their first impression was wrong.

After hunting down the canines in the immediate area, they noticed that there were no signs of any other breed of animal to be found. It seemed that the dogs had killed and eaten every other form of animal life in the area, if not on the island. When the settlers began to land, the herds had to be closely guarded. As well as clearing the jungle for farms, there were regular dog hunts. Fortunately, most of the packs had been cleared out, though there were always new packs arriving.

Carl arrived at this time and they discussed the method of embarkation. The steam launch in which the officer had arrived was part of a small flotilla. There was a cargo ship beyond the breakwater. They would signal it in, as soon as he reported back and the loading would begin at once.

The officer informed Carl that no animals would be allowed and each family was limited to a wagonload of goods, to be measured by the loading officer. Exceptions would be made for religious articles and small pets only.

As the officer was turning to leave Zach took him aside and warned him about Samuel Steinman. The young man smiled and said, "If there is trouble, then we leave him and he will become your problem, again."

Chapter 19

Farewells, the Journey Home and Loss

Winter 2045/2046

As much as I am going to miss Carl and the chess games, I will be happy to see the last of Samuel Steinman. The man may mean well, but his is a royal pain. The young Israeli lieutenant sounded like he meant what he said about leaving him. If he does, then La Porte has its first citizen, because we aren't taking him back.

It's hard to believe the cache of weapons the Cavanaugh's have. I really wish there was a way to bring it all back. It is too bad that the heavy equipment was all destroyed when they went back last year. Appears that reavers just torched the whole place. The reavers in Texas seem to love fire. Most of the buildings we have seen are blackened ruins. Just destruction for destruction's sake.

The young Israeli lieutenant had an interesting report on the condition of Cuba. An island even more deserted than when Columbus showed up. They haven't found any signs of life, other than birds, monkeys and dogs. Eerie.

Tomorrow they start loading the new Israelis. I told them that if we come across any others who are interested, we would contact them on the same band. We would find a Hebrew speaker to give the code words, so they would know it was us.

Early the next morning a lighter lay alongside the dock. The winch and boom arm was over the dock and the cargo net was being loaded with the contents of the first wagon. As it was filled, the net was swung up and the cargo unloaded. When Zach saw that Samuel was standing dockside, he immediately reversed himself and went in search of Carl Weisenfeld in the collection of tents set up for the departing families.

He found him sitting at a makeshift table speaking with several other elders. Carl excused himself when he saw Zach approaching. He drew him to a seat at the other end of the table and asked him to wait for him. The older man hurried to a tent he shared with Rebecca, his wife, emerging a few minutes later with a cloth-wrapped bundle under his arm. He brought it over to Zach and placed it reverently in front of him. Zach untied the string and opened the covering. Sitting in front of him was an oblong box with gold and silver squares framed by highly polished wood. The box was hinged and, when Zach opened it, he found thirty-two felt bags, each in its own slot. Zach lifted one of the bags out and carefully undid the strings. Inside he found a small golden figure of a kneeling man with an M21 carbine.

Slipping the figure back into the bag and replacing it, he lifted another one out of its slot from the other side. This bag contained a silver figure of a horseman.

He looked up at the obviously pleased Rabbi. "No," he whispered. "This is too fine for me. It's too much. Something as fine as this is for your children and grandchildren to admire."

A broad grin lit up the old man's face. "Now, now. I can make another. This one is for you. Rebecca says so and Adam, my son, says so. If they say it is so, who am I to argue?"

"I don't know what to say," said Zach. "Thank you." He stood and gave the old man a hug and then shook his hand. "Well, do you have time for a game?"

"Of course, why did you think I gave it to you? We must play," he said sitting down and rubbing his hand together.

The loading proceeded well into the afternoon before the last of the goods was in the hold of the river lighter. It had made two trips to the cargo ship in Galveston Bay. Another boat was standing by to take on the passengers. Samuel came up to where Zach and Carl were standing and stuck out his hand. "We have not always agreed, but I want you to know that I appreciate

what you have done for us.” After a brisk handshake, he turned and walked to the passenger boat.

Carl and Zach stared at each other with surprised looks. “I think that is about as close to an apology as we are going to see.”

When the final farewells were said and the last tears shed, the ships pulled away. The Israelis stood at the railing, waving, until they rounded the bar. A feeling of emptiness was left after the bustle of the day.

Carl called a council after dinner and outlined his plans. They would head back to the Cavanaughs first thing in the morning, foregoing the proposed scouting mission against the Aztecs until they secured the weapons. Harry McGregor felt that they could do both, but Carl argued that the main job they had was to make sure the supplies were safe. Jimmy Pinder observed that they could start the scouting mission from Palo Duro as well as from Houston and the meeting broke up.

Before dawn Third and Ninth Rangers had formed a loose cordon around the troops. They had two trucks, twelve wagons and a small herd of loose horses. They made good time back and arrived to find ten trucks loaded and a pile of supplies covered with tarps standing in the barnyard. Every trooper had been issued a new M34, cleaning/tool kit and two hundred rounds of ammunition. Many of the troopers also sported a military shotgun and had a hundred rounds of ammunition for these. Each trooper had two 9mm pistols and a belt containing pouches for fresh clips and loose ammunition.

Zach grinned and shook his head as Ishar Singh enfolded him in a customary bear hug. “You guys look like the old pictures of Pancho Villa’s gang.” It was true; every trooper had ammunition belts crossed over their chests.

“Yes, we say you coming. We dressed up just for you,” joked the huge Sikh. “Come, look what we have found.” He went from truck to truck pointing out the loads; machine guns, SAMs, rifles, pistols, shotguns, ammunition, anti-tank shells, anti-personnel shells, spare parts, cases of MRE, RPGs, fuel cells, communication equipment and much more. The pile of tarp-covered supplies contained M34s, shotguns, grenades, ammunition and combat knives.

Carl ordered his troopers to exchange their weapons for the newer rifles and there was a flurry of movement. Within the hour, the new weapons had been field stripped, cleaned of grease, oiled and loaded. The men wanted to try them out, but Carl overruled them. He didn’t want to take the chance that the uproar of fifty weapons being fired would be overheard.

While the newly arrived troopers were arming themselves, the rest had divested themselves of their weapons and begun loading the two trucks and ten wagons. When this was completed, there were still mounds of supplies in the two barns, though they were much diminished from what there had been. Carl decided to wire the rest with explosives. He ordered the main wire and a redundant set to be strung to a gulley that provided a multitude of escape routes. He then ordered Ninth Rangers to remain in the area and set off the charges if the valley was found before they could return and collect the remaining supplies. He was determined to get all of it back, if possible.

The Cavanaugh women prepared a huge feast that night. Their wagons and the two pickup trucks had been loaded with their household goods, but there wasn’t enough room to take all the canned goods, at least this trip. They dined on roast pig, sheep, chicken and beef that had been set over mounded embers in pits dug in the yard. Fresh bread and rolls and butter, preserves, canned corn, beans, peas and carrots finished off the meal. Cakes and cookies had been baked for dessert and no one left the table empty.

Harry McGregor volunteered to stay with Juan Ojeda and Ninth Rangers. They were checking the wires when the train left the valley. A squad would ride to the turn off and try to obscure their traces. The rangers had portable heaters that they would set up in the draw, but no fires would be lit, unless the cold drove them to it.

Only the trapping of a small gang of reavers broke the journey back to Palo Duro. The reavers were hung and six women were freed. Upon questioning, the reaver leader said that there had been a call to all bands to meet somewhere in southern Missouri. They hadn't wanted to travel that far so they had ignored the call. He admitted the name attached to the call had been General March, which they had thought a joke.

They pressed on and reached Palo Duro. There was no time to do more than give a longer version of the report they had condensed for the radio transmission. They began unloading immediately and replaced the Cavanaugh truck, which were almost out of fuel with all of the wagons they could scrape together. Seventeen Troop replaced Sixteen Troop for the return trip. They left the next morning on fresh mounts with a train of twenty-five wagons. The recovery was uneventful and the troopers finally got a hot meal and an actual bed. They were given three day's leave to rest and recuperate.

The rest of the original load of supplies had been reloaded onto the trucks and driven north. They stopped in Gunnison and Rio Grande and unloaded their share before pushing on to Mitchell.

Several trucks had broken down, but their fuel was transferred to others, which towed them and they all reached Mitchell. John Singleton and his crew immediately began fitting them out with the new power cells.

After a three-day leave, the Ninth Rangers were sent south to observe San Antonio and collect information on the Aztec settlement. Ominously, there had been no attempts at fraternization or trade with the regular patrols. Zach, eager to get back to Sarah, and Carl took Third Rangers, Two Ten and Thirteen Troops and wagons loaded with the second load of munitions and set out north. Thirteen Troop turned off at Gunnison and the rest of the train continued on.

When they arrived in Mitchell, the necessary supplies were distributed to the settlements in and around Mitchell and the remainder stored in a new, fireproof concrete bunker. Ed was pleased with the operation, though he looked drawn and worn.

Sarah greeted him with surprising fierceness. She clung to him tightly and Zach could tell she had been crying. Maizey and Steve kept the children out of the way while they spent the evening together. There were surprisingly few words exchanged. Sarah seemed content just to lie in his arms. Zach, once again, promised that he would not put her through this again. Then, with a rue smile he knew that it was a promise he probably wouldn't keep.

She was better the next morning and Zach stayed home and did neglected chores around the house, told stories to the children and practiced his carving. He and Steve went over the herd to see how well they were standing the sharp winter. Several storms had arrived in quick succession after his return and the roads were almost closed to travel.

They all went out to cut down Christmas trees and spent the evening decorating them, singing carols and feasting on roast beef, potatoes, canned vegetables and pudding for dessert. Gifts were exchanged. Matt and his troop had discovered an out of the way farm and, while they were salvaging what they could, he stumbled across a cedar trunk containing a collection of Peace Dolls. These were dolls representing all the countries of the world, dressed in native

costumes with a ribbon with the word 'Peace' in the doll's native language. He brought them back and Zach managed to get one for each of the girls, Sarah got the one representing China and Elizabeth Rondell got the one for Norway. In the same house, there were sets of toy soldiers and the Banducci boys received the Battle of Rourke's Drift.

Zach had taken a locket off the body of a reaver. It had a beautifully scrolled 'S' and several diamonds and he presented that to Sarah, without the story of how he came into possession of it.

He received a muffler and watch cap of brown and yellow yarn. It was Sarah's first attempt at knitting. The scarf was long enough to wrap around his throat several time and the ends still hung down to his knees. The watch cap was roomy enough to cover his neck and ears. When Sarah disparaged her efforts, Zach gave her a hug and told her that he loved them both. The scarf would be long enough to tie down his hat on windy days and the watch cap was terrifically warm.

All-in-all, it was a peaceful Christmas. The New Year dawned bright and clear, though cold. Zach and Steven hitched the horses to the wagon, which had runners replacing the wheels. Both families rode to town in a holiday mood. After church services they attended the holiday party held in the Town Hall. Everyone brought a dish to share and there was dancing and visiting. Families had come from Big Valley, Black Valley, Gold Cove, Beaver Valley, Eagle and Rio Grande settlements. The hotel was full and every spare bed was taken.

During a lull in the dancing, Zach, Gail O'Malley and Benton Robison discussed the need for a larger hotel and a school. The existing school consisted of three houses taken over for classrooms and another for administration. Benton told her to bring it up at the next meeting of

the Council and she told him, with asperity, that she had brought it up to the council innumerable time and they had sent it to a committee that never met.

Benton, realizing that he was trapped, promised to put the issue at the top of the agenda and made an excuse to leave. "That man," snapped the exasperated woman. "How can we have a school without a dedicated building? We are not the small community we started out. Zach, you have children. Back me up."

Zach was warm from the dancing and the punch and said, "Gail, why don't you find out how many hours are owed to the commissary. Building a school would let people pay off their debts. Talk it over with William. Have Tim Beard do some plans, maybe have the couple from Gunnison, oh, the, the Milemskis, come up for a conference.

"About the hotel. I think it would be a lot better if you planned a couple of barracks buildings, instead. Say, one for each troop and room for a couple more, if we grow or have other troops coming in for training or whatever. A smaller building for the Auxiliaries to meet, another for the Rangers. A real War Room and some offices for Ed and the rest of the advisors. All built around a parade ground.

"You know, I heard William complaining about the number of hours owed. See him and start the ball rolling. Remember, it is easier to ask forgiveness than permission."

Sarah come over at that moment and took Zach's arm to lead him to the dance floor. She was as graceful as Zach was clumsy on the dance floor. However, he knew better than to refuse and this gave him an excuse to break off the conversation with Gail.

He told her what they had been talking about and Sarah thought it was a very good idea. Zach agreed, but said it would be a lot easier if Gail weren't so intense. Sarah laughed as Zach

spun her onto the dance floor and suggested that a community center would be another worthy cause. Zach suggested that she head the committee and the conversation turned to other topics.

When they were packing up to leave, 'Doc' White touched Zach's arm and indicated that he wanted to speak with him privately. Zach excused himself and walked with the doctor to a corner where most of the War Council was waiting. A chill ran up Zach's spine. "What crisis, now?" he thought. He pictured a surprise attack from somewhere, an avalanche, a devastating raid. By the time they had joined the group, Zach's imagination had galloped away.

"I called you all together to let you know that Ed is over at the hospital. He took a turn for the worse. I have him sedated, but there isn't much time. The cancer spread faster than I expected. Tomorrow, you might want to say your good-bys."

He left the stunned men. They all knew that Ed was ill, but hadn't thought of him gone. He had been there almost from the beginning. They looked at each other and shook their heads. The group broke up with no more conversation and Zach returned to Sarah, Maizey and Steve with the news. He asked Sarah if she minded him staying in town that night.

She shook her head and gave him a hug, telling him she would stay with Asta. Steve promised to get the kids home safely and Zach loaded the sleepy children into the wagon and covered them up with robes. When they had gone, he walked over to the hospital and quietly slipped into Ed's room and sat in the armchair beside the bed reminiscing about the past few years and Ed's role in the founding of Jefferson.

Later, Carl slipped into the room. He moved a chair from another room and the two men sat quietly watching their friend struggling to breathe, lost in their own thoughts. As the night wore on, the others from the War Council joined the vigil.

Melissa Grant, the night nurse, brought in chairs, coffee and sandwiches. The only thing she asked was that they be quiet out of respect for the other patients.

Around dawn, Ed woke. He weakly thanked them for coming and said a few words to each of them. 'Doc' came in and quietly shooed them from the room and closed the door. When he exited the room, he herded them out to the porch. Outside, they found all of the off-duty troopers.

'Doc' looked around at the somber faces. "He is resting now. I gave him some painkillers. To tell you the truth, he won't be too lucid from now on. The drugs are going to keep him pretty much under.

"Now, go home. He could linger for several days. If anything changes, I will give you a call," he turned back to the door. No one left. They gathered in small groups, telling anecdotes about Ed.

Father Tilford greeted them, briefly, before entering the hospital. He was carrying his Last Rites case. A quarter of an hour later he came out. He shook his head before anyone had the chance to ask him anything. Tess White. Rhonda O'Dell and Connie Olsen brought several baskets of fresh cinnamon rolls and coffee. They escorted a tired looking Asta. Sarah joined Zach and they held hands.

An hour later 'Doc' came out of the hospital, wiping his glasses. "It's over," he said. "Ed is gone. He passed quietly a few minutes ago."

The men and boys murmured their sympathies to Ed's family as the members hurried into the hospital. Carl addressed the gathered crowd. "Let's break it up. Ed wouldn't have wanted us to stand around with long faces. We will let you all know when the family sets the time for

the memorial. I do want to thank you all for coming, it meant a lot to Ed and the family. We are going to miss him.”

The crowd broke up and Zach put his arm around Sarah. She asked him if they could go home. There seemed a need in her to be with her family.

Zach borrowed a small wagon and drove home in silence, Sarah snuggled close, her head on his shoulder. The morning was clouding up and the wind had a bite to it. By the time they reached the ranch, a light snow was falling. Zach looked in on the children and took the cup of coffee Maizey gave him and sat on the front porch, watching the snow fall, covering their tracks. William, sensing something was wrong, toddled out and climbed onto Zach’s lap. His father opened his coat and wrapped it around the small boy and quietly rocked.

A while later, disgusted with his mood, he woke up his son and told him to bundle up, they were going to have a snow fight. For the rest of the day, he played with his children and reveled in life with them. Later, he said to Sarah, “There will be enough grieving later. Not just for Ed, but for everybody. Ed was full of life, so let us celebrate it like he did.”

The healing process had begun. The funeral was put off until the ground thawed and Ed’s coffin was placed in the ‘Morgue’. A cinderblock building reserved for those who died in winter.

Chapter 20

Dealing with the Aztecs

Winter/Spring 2045/2046

A lot has happened since I last wrote in this thing. We got the Jews off and scored big time with the Cavanaugh Cache. Every trooper in the community is provided with the latest rifle and the militia has M-25s. We have a lot of mismatched weaponry for the younger boys and girls for safety and training courses and target practice. We will still collect black powder weapons when we can, but we have enough munitions to fight a big war and with reloading, we can go on for a long time. Maybe, by that time John Singleton and Company will develop laser weapons like in the SciFi movies.

We also lost a cornerstone of our community. We will miss Ed more than we realize. He was a steady hand. We will miss his strength and his repertoire of really poor jokes. He always had a story that applied to every occasion, no matter what the topic. You either groaned or laughed. Carl will have to replace him as military commander. A role he is fit to assume, if my opinion is worth anything.

Now that winter is ending, I imagine that something will have to be done with the Aztecs in San Antonio. I was hoping to get through one year without a major campaign. I am not a pacifist, one of those peace at any price guys, but I am not sure that a shooting war would be the best thing. Not only would Palo Duro be in danger, but an alliance between the Mahdists, reavers and Aztecs would put a lot of pressure on Jefferson as a whole.

The rest of the winter passed. The Council met and agreed to Gail's building project. She had presented plans for both the school and the barracks complex, along with a list of people

in debt to the Commissary and the materials on hand and what would be required, in addition, to build.

William Smith agreed to inform those concerned that their chits were being called in and where and when they would be needed. He added to the list of supplies. The scouting expeditions had made careful notes of the locations of things like cement, bricks, plumbing and electrical supplies and other bulky items that weren't moved until needed.

The only concession the Council asked was that the project would be put off until after the planting and spring repair and cleaning was done. It was decided that, as soon as it was feasible, they would start clearing the ground for the school and barracks. John Sinclair said they might have some heavy equipment fitted with the new power supplies, but that they also had a new source of bio-diesel they were working on.

Spring broke suddenly, as if embarrassed at being so late, in early May. Ed's funeral was held as soon as the ground was thawed enough to excavate. Jim Gonzales carved a small block of marble for his headstone. It was shaped as a small castle, complete with towers and crenellations. A small bronze plaque was inscribed with Ed's name, date of birth and date of death and the words, 'A Warrior for the Ages'. Representatives attended the funeral from every settlement.

By the middle of the month, the land had been tilled and planted. At the end of May, John Singleton had finished fitting the new power conversion units on an earthmover and a pair of backhoes. He was rushing to finish several cement mixers and a generator array for battery powered tools. Convoys of trucks were sent out to cement plants, gravel pits, sand dumps and other storage areas to load supplies onto the deuce and a halves, fitted with solid sides.

A site had been selected for the barracks units and the footings were being dug by hand and the preformed cement blocks set. Lumber had been carted in from the sawmills and the buildings were growing as if by magic.

In the midst of this activity, a startling message arrived from Palo Duro. They had been able to erect a powerful transmitter and relay tower from the Cavanaugh Cache, as it was coming to be known. The message read: "Aztecs called on us. They want a meeting about reavers. Seems that one of their settlements was wiped out. We have seen heightened activity in the area east of us, also, near Dallas."

The War Council met immediately. The big question was what were the Aztecs doing to the east. Nothing had been heard of any settlement that far east and north. Harry made the comment that they should have wiped out the San Antonio settlement last winter. They radioed Palo Duro and made a connection, though it was scratchy and faded in and out.

The full story came in from the other end of the line. The Aztecs had discovered the series of expeditions to the Houston area and, wanting to establish claim to the area, had dispatched a small group of settlers and a troop of cavalry. They received a dispatch rider requesting immediate aid. There had been several small raids on the herds and then a larger one, which claimed the lives of half a dozen families and several troopers. Another troop of cavalry had been sent and they found the half built town burned and no living soul in sight. The second day they were there, they had been attacked by a large band of men and more than half their force had been killed in the resulting running fight. There were not enough men in San Antonio to mount an expedition, without leaving the settlement defenseless.

The General in charge had sent a party under a flag of truce to start negotiations for a joint operation to punish the gang. As a result of any cooperative operation, they were prepared

to establish firm boundaries between their nations and swore to adhere to any agreement and exchange diplomats. They had asked specifically that Zach Banducci represent Jefferson.

Similar expletives were repeated throughout the meeting room. Carl, who had taken over Ed's post as commander, gaveled for order. He recognized Benton Robison.

"I agree that this sounds like hooey. The Aztecs have never tried to contact us, diplomatically and have never given us any reason to believe they would recognize our claim to any lands, even those we occupy. That being said, I would say we have to, at least, talk to them and determine what they really want."

"What I want to know," said Hans, "is why they want Zach. No offense, Zach, but you are about as diplomatic as a rock."

The rest of the council laughed. It was well known that diplomacy was not high on Zach's list of accomplishments.

"All right, listen up," Carl said, interrupting the banter with Zach. "Let's look at this from a military point of view. The Aztecs had nearly two hundred men in San Antonio. Say they sent fifty with the new settlers. Another fifty, maybe, were sent later and they lost thirty to forty percent. That leaves about two-thirds of the original two hundred, say one hundred and thirty-five. It would take weeks to months to get any sizeable force there, with travel time to and from Mexico City, or whatever they call their capitol.

"I don't think they have radio communication so it would all be by dispatch rider."

Zach was recognized and said, "I agree with Bent. It can't hurt to talk with them, though I would never agree to have their diplomats/spies stationed here. I also agree with Hans. I really would like to know the reason why I would be included."

Another call to Palo Duro gave them the answer. The commander of the Aztecs was Jose Morales, the general taken in the fight at the beginning of last year. Apparently, as punishment for his failure, he was given a dead-end command on the outskirts of the Empire.

There was further discussion, but the upshot was that Zach would lead a delegation to meet with the Aztecs. The rest of the delegation would include Michael Diggs and Grady O'Malley, who had been politicians; Wade Bronski, a financier and Robert Agnello, a lawyer. They decided to send Four, Eleven, Nine (Eagle), Fourteen (Rio Grande) and Nineteen (Gunnison) Troops and First, Fourth and Fifth (Eagle) Rangers. Jimmy would divide Ten Troop and station one squad, each, to Eagle and Rio Grande.

"If we join some expedition, then I want the firepower necessary to move immediately, rather than have to send for reinforcements," said Hans, who would take control of Fourth Rangers, for the expedition.

The others agreed and word was sent of the plans to Eagle, Rio Grande and Big Valley. Jimmy was asked to vacate his men from the hotel and send them to their new stations.

When the Eagle and Big Valley troopers came into town, they were exuberant at the opportunity to break the monotony and be part of the expedition. Fifth Rangers from Eagle decided that they were tougher than anyone else and a good-natured, beer fueled challenge erupted into a shoving match and would have accelerated further if Harold Churchill, who was tending bar, didn't use a plastic bat to quell the combatant's ardor. He agreed to keep it out of the hands of the War Council if the boys shook hands and controlled themselves. Since none of the troopers wanted to face Carl, they agreed and soon were the best of friends, again.

The Council gave Zach and the negotiators their instructions. The Aztecs were to set the border at the old U.S./Mexico line, refrain from crossing the border with an armed force and

establish a trading center around El Paso. If pushed, they could cede the areas of settlement in Arizona and New Mexico, currently occupied by the Aztecs, but no new settlements would be tolerated. There was a settlement near Phoenix, in Albuquerque and another on the Plains of St. Augustine.

There was some debate about sending the tanks, which had proved so successful against the reaver gang they wiped out in Kansas, but Carl was adamant about not putting them in hands reach of the Aztecs, from whom they took them. “The temptation may be too great for them to resist,” was how he put it.

With war whoops and hollering, the expedition started out. The Rangers had been deployed to form a screen around the troopers. The troops were drilled and honed to a sharp edge by Hans, who took his post as expedition commander seriously. Those who didn’t think he was serious soon found out their mistake, to their chagrin.

They picked up Fourteen Troop in Rio Grande and dropped off the squad from Ten Troop. Connie Wade, the mayor, was cautioned to keep an eye out for reavers. She assured them that they never let down their guard and their Rangers would beef up patrols.

They left the same message with Gregory Bronski and Ed Black at Gunnison. Wade discovered that the two men were related by having the same great-great-great grandfather. They told them that they were hesitant to take one of the troops from their settlement, since the Aztecs might have something up their sleeves and they wanted a strong force at their backs. Ed indicated that he would send a message to the Shorts and enlist their aid in watching for any activity in the south. He was sure of their cooperation, since the settlement had turned over some of their older arms and ammunition to them when they got the new M34 rifles from the Cavanaugh Cache.

They arrived at Palo Duro in time to get a message from General Morales. He was anxious to set up the meeting between the parties as soon as possible. The settlement at San Antonio had been raided and there was an attack on a patrol out of El Paso. The reavers were growing bolder. Zach gave a note to the messenger saying that they were prepared to meet on the next Thursday at Guthrie Lake on US87 south of Tahoka. Each side was to bring no more than thirty men to the meeting, any excess of that would be left on the high mound to the west of the lake by Zach and the high ground to the east of the lake by the Aztecs.

As usual, Ishar Singh demanded to be part of the expedition and Eleven Troop and First Rangers were left at Palo Duro. Sixteen Troop and Ninth Rangers replaced them. The rangers would make up part of the troops to accompany the negotiators, since they all spoke Spanish.

They started the journey under a warm spring sun. The rangers spread out in their usual position surrounding the troops. The two pickup trucks flanked the column. They made good time and reached the mesa the afternoon before the meeting. Zach scanned the high ground to the east and noticed that the Aztecs had arrived early, also. He sent a rider, under a white flag, to General Morales, with a case of Rosaia wine, a suggestion from Grady O'Malley. The rider returned with six bottles of Tequila.

The next morning, the two parties met. Zach assembled the men who were assigned to him. When they were ready, he selected five of the Spanish speakers who did not look Hispanic. Ishar Singh questioned him and Zach replied that taking less than the agreed upon thirty displayed confidence or trust, either of which leaves an impression.

The Aztecs set up a large pavilion on a flat piece of ground and furnished it with a table and chairs. They provided refreshments and there was even a small band with guitars, violins and hand drums.

Zach greeted General Morales and introduced his delegation. The Aztecs had sent a single diplomat who spoke no English. General Morales translated and Mitchell Grimes, from the Ninth Rangers, said the translations were what the general wanted Senor Cristobal to hear. The trooper was tall and fair of skin and hair, but spoke impeccable Spanish.

The General opened the meeting by outlining the situation. “There was a group of men who came to San Antonio and offered to protect us from raiders, for a price. Of course, Senor Cristobal sent them packing with some rather choice insults. I was leading a patrol and was not there.” He turned to his companion and smiled. Senor Cristobal smiled back hesitantly and nodded. “When I returned and found out what this incompetent idiot had done, the table had been set. A few nights later, half of our herds were taken and several soldiers killed.

“No, not just killed. They were hung from their ankles from trees and had their throats cut. Much as one would bleed an animal. We were unable to track them down; due to a storm. Since then, there have been constant raids. If we chase them, they attack the town, if we don’t; they get away with no threat of punishment.

“About two months ago, just as the roads were clearing, I was in El Paso trying to get more supplies and men to track down this band and still keep the settlement at San Antonio safe. This idiot,” he turned and smiled at Senor Cristobal, “decided to send out twenty-five families and fifty of my men and set up a settlement near Houston. We had heard that you had been in that area several times and he was worried that you would establish a settlement first and establish a claim of some sorts. All of this when we couldn’t effectively protect what we had.

“Needless to say, the raiders hit the expedition and Captain Sanchez sent back a rider asking for help. My idiot friend here, suddenly got nervous and, instead of sending out an adequate force or, better yet, not sending anyone, he sends another fifty troopers out.

“They arrive at the place where the column was attacked and they, in turn, are attacked. They had a running fight back to San Antonio. All in all, we have lost the twenty-five families and nearly seventy troops.

“I, meanwhile, what is the English? Oh, I, meanwhile, am fat, dumb and happy. I have managed to scrape together a hundred men, two small artillery pieces and replacement horses and cattle. When I return, I find that we are not much better off than when I left. We have, maybe, thirty more men, but not enough to mount a campaign. To top that off, that night, the herds are raided, again, and I lose five more men and the two herders.”

Zach, in his turn, told of the trouble they have had with the reavers. He detailed the run in with General March and the subsequent destruction of the gang in Kansas. He also explained why they were in the Houston area and that there was no plan to establish a settlement there. He smiled at Senor Cristobal when he said that only a fool would think Jefferson would try to support a settlement so far from the Rockies. Senor Cristobal smiled back.

“There. We are both up to speed on what is relevant to the other,” said Zach. “What do you propose?”

“Either your General March has changed his mind about activities west of New Jerusalem or this gang is not working with him. Regardless, what we propose is to eliminate the gang. Just that simple.”

“To tell the truth, they aren’t bothering us. I think, maybe, that General March doesn’t want his boys messing with us, but doesn’t mind them going after alternative targets. Remember, he is king of the hill as long as he is successful and has the power to make his orders stand. If he gets too restrictive, then there is going to be a war among the reavers, something he

doesn't want. He has given them the Fundies and you, the Aztecs. He is leaving our allies and us alone. You mounted an operation against the Mormons, why not against the reavers?

"Now, I will admit that getting rid of reavers is always a goal to be sought, but I don't see what that gets us."

"But, surely, you see that when they are done with us, they will probably move on Palo Duro. Then you would have to fight them alone," the General said. He turned to Senor Cristobal and repeated what Zach had said. The civilian administrator became visibly upset and unleashed a torrent of words. The General listened for a few minutes and gently cut him off.

"Senor Banducci, you must forgive us. We are in a precarious position. The truth of the matter is that, though he is a cousin of the King in Mexico City, Senor Cristobal has been sent to this backwater for certain indiscretions. I, myself, am here because of that very expedition you speak of. By the way, that expedition was not against the Mormons. We were feinting north, but had a plan to cut across the Sierras and enter California north of Lake Tahoe.

"That no longer matters. It was a foolish plan conceived by other relatives of the King. The point that matters is that neither of us is in good standing with the capitol. I was fortunate to get the men I did. It was made clear to me that these were the last."

Mitchell Diggs cleared his throat and sat forward. "Let me say, General, you are being very open with us. Let me be as open. This joint operation, you propose. We would bear the brunt of it, correct?" He waited for Morales to translate and for both men to nod their heads in agreement. He went on, tenting his fingers on the table, "We feel that taking on the reavers would open us up to an assault by General March and we could sustain further losses as a result. My question to you is: What's in it for us? What do we get, other than grief?" he sat back and let the General translate.

There was a long discussion between the two men. Finally, Senor Cristobal's shoulders slumped and he waved his hand in agreement. The General turned back and said, "We are prepared to offer you a peace treaty. Palo Duro and all, current, settlements will not be the target of any military action. In addition, we will exchange ambassadors and begin trade talks."

Robert Agnello sat up from his slouched position as the General spoke. "General, there are a few phrases that I have a question about. You want to offer us a peace treaty, but are you authorized by your government to do this? Secondly, you qualified that peace treaty by including only existing settlements. Our population is growing and new settlements will be built to accommodate this rise in population. Are you saying that these future colonies will be open to assault?"

"Senor Agnello, we are authorized to speak for our government," said the General and he turned to Senor Cristobal and spoke to him. The man, reluctantly, took a paper from his pocket and extended it to Robert. Zach looked at the document and saw that it was written in Spanish. To keep up the charade, he had Mitchell ask Juan Ojeda to come in to translate the document. When Juan had done so, he left. The paper indicated that the Aztec Kingdom would abide by any agreement reached by Senor Cristobal and General Morales.

"Okay, spit it out," said Zach. "No one gives carte blanche like this if there isn't more to the story than you have told me. I know that you are trying to get our help as cheaply as possible, but the time has come to lay all your cards on the table, General."

General Morales shrugged and lit a cigar. "You are correct, Senor Banducci. There is more to this than you have been told. The reaver band is between one hundred and fifty and two hundred strong. It has wiped out several smaller settlements we tried to establish along the old border between El Paso and Brownsville. Our plan is much the same as yours; as the population

grows; push out new settlements to claim more territory. The King is adamant about retaking the land lost two hundred years ago. Unfortunately, there are problems in the south and west and we don't have the importance to warrant a large expedition against the reaver gang. Our only hope is to form a coalition with you and eliminate or so badly damage the gang that our settlements along the border are safe."

Grady O'Malley took a cigar from the box on the table and took his time lighting it. When he had it going to his satisfaction, he said, "Gentlemen, let's cut to the chase. General, you can't hold the territory you have taken. I would assume that the reavers, going after your border settlements, have also struck at the established settlements, too. You don't have the manpower to defend a rather long border, fight this new foe to the south and maintain the lines in the Bear Flag Republic. Does that about sum it up?"

The General gave a reluctant nod and translated.

Grady went on, "These are our terms for helping you. One: a peace treaty and the borders return to the old U.S./Mexico line. Two: open trade, with a trading center established in El Paso. Three: our allies are to be treated as if they were we. Fourth: you will bear the brunt of the cost of the expedition, supplies, horses, ammunition, everything. Fifth: we will be in military control of the expedition. Sixth: you will repatriate all prisoners and slaves taken north of the old U.S./Mexico border, within a year. Any along the border will be turned over before the expedition begins."

When the terms were translated, Senor Cristobal exploded out of his seat. He screamed at the General, waving his arms and pacing the tent. The General let him rant for a few minutes and cut him off with a shout. He spoke angrily and the man sat back down.

“The terms are unacceptable, gentlemen,” said the General. “We have extensive settlements in the Plains of St. Augustine and around Phoenix. We cannot uproot those settlements. The peace treaty is acceptable.

“A trading center will benefit us both. Agreed.

“We cannot treat your allies the same as we treat you. As you know, we are at war with the Californians. We cannot abandon this war, nor give up the territory and settlements in the areas we occupy.

“We will bear the cost of the expedition, as best we can. And, we will put our soldiers at your command.

“The prisoners of war cannot be repatriated, but we will return all Anglo slaves we captured north of the old border.”

Grady had been scribbling on a tablet and looked up as the General finished. “The borders will be established at the point of your furthest settlement north and no new settlements will be built further north. All Anglos will be repatriated, regardless of where they originated and all; non-military prisoners captured north of the old U.S./Mexico border will be repatriated.”

“I agree, with the stipulation that my government will have to approve.”

Robert began to write a clean, clear copy as the General translated the final terms to Senor Cristobal. The civilian representative grumbled, but nodded his agreement.

“General, it will take you time to dismantle the San Antonio settlement, gather supplies, gather those to be repatriated and return here. I also need time to gather intelligence about our enemy,” said Hans Minkema. “I suggest you return to El Paso, contact your government, do everything you need to do and meet us back here in two months. Mr. Agnello will make two

copies of the document, Zach, as Justice of the Peace, will sign for us and you can return with someone from your government authorized to sign.

“Until tomorrow, gentlemen?” Hans rose and reached across the table and shook hands. With the conclusion of negotiations, refreshments were served. The Aztecs admired the wine and the Jeffersonians, when they could breathe, admired the tequila and the spicy dishes prepared by Cristobal’s cooks.

The next morning, the signed copies of the treaties were handed over to Senor Cristobal. The General gave Hans as much intelligence on the reavers as he had and the two forces departed.

Chapter 21

The Expedition: Planning

Spring 2046

An expedition with the Aztecs. I'm not too sure that we should be doing it. I agree that a treaty and halt to any northward expansion will ease the danger on Palo Duro. Even though I don't expect them to repatriate everyone, there will have to be some, a good number, actually, before the expedition starts. I was pretty surprised when I was told I could sign for Jefferson. What a lot of power a Justice of the Peace has.

I have been pressing Carl to let us take the tanks, but he is sticking in his heels. The best we can do is the machine gun mounted trucks. We will be taking a lot of RPG and mortars. I am hoping to trap them in a static position. I don't want a running fight and a long series of battles.

Hans sent the scouts out and they are supposed to be in by the first of the week, when we will have to head out and meet Morales. I would like to treat them like cannon fodder, but that would cause a break with the Aztecs and jeopardize Benton's bright new world.

The scouts were sent out to find the reavers and the rest returned to Palo Duro. There, they sent a transmission to Mitchell, informing them of the content of the conference and the results. They were told to stay there. Thirteen Troop from Gunnison and First Rangers from Mitchell were added to the expeditionary force. They brought additional arms, ammunition and supplies with them. Hans ran the troops through their paces, drilling them in mounted and dismounted maneuvers, both for advance and retreat.

Reports came in from the Rangers. The reavers were changing their tactics. Rather than the burn and plunder operations they were known for, the new order of things was to take tribute.

The farmers, ranchers and small communities were allowed to survive, if supplies and women were made available. It appeared that they were setting up a fiefdom that extended from Corpus Christi to San Antonio to Houston.

The scouts reported that the reavers had threatened the Texans that they would be killed if they tried to leave, turning them into virtual serfs. A few of them were helpful, but most were too scared. Several times they had been turned in to the reavers, but managed to avoid contact. They always portrayed themselves as Aztec scouts.

Ninth Rangers returned a week before the deadline set by Hans. They were dirty, bearded and thin, but exuberant. Several had bandages covering old wounds and more than one new scar could be seen. It was evident that they had been living rough off the land.

Hans ordered them checked out by Doctor Ahluwaila Singh and the nurse, Mary Samuelson, before reporting. When they had been given a clean bill of health, a bath, new clothes, a hot meal and an hour's rest, Juan Ojedo reported to the Palo Duro council, augmented by the expedition leaders.

"Sirs, we tracked them down to Lake Texana." He pointed to the area on a map of Texas. They have the main camp, here, in Manson and an auxiliary camp, here, across the lake in Ganado. They are connected by US59 running across the lake. There are farms and ranches nearby. It looks like they brought in a bunch of people and settled them there.

"We captured a reaver and he told us that the Ganado bunch is responsible for anything east of the lake and the Manson bunch is responsible for the west. They have a couple of old machine guns and a single cannon they got from a museum.

"There are about two hundred in Manson and a hundred and fifty in Ganado. US59 lets them move troops to support each other or they can cross it and blow it up. It is wired with

explosives. Adam Relgado and Jesse Perez were able to get to it along the shore. There are guards at the Manson end, but they are usually playing cards or sleeping. Adam and Jesse didn't try anything like cutting the wires; but it could be done easy enough. The explosives were just hanging from the bridge.

"When they went out, there were usually seventy-five or eighty of them. There was only one group gone at a time, it seemed to alternate between the two camps. We tried to get closer, maybe hear something, but, after Miguel Torres was trapped in a farmer's barn for a day by local patrols, we gave it up.

"They are pretty brutal. They suspected that the farmer where Miguel was hiding knew something and, when he refused to speak or couldn't tell them anything, they shot him and his whole family. Miguel was pretty upset about it. We did see that there was a lot of partying going on. There are sentry posts on these two roads and a couple of mounted patrols. Again, they aren't too alert."

The council thanked him. Hans stood and approached the map on the wall. He called for another, more detailed view and stuck it up on the wall next to the Texas map. Ishar Singh, William Daniels, Don Massoglia, And Newman, Jusius Rosaia, John Grenier, Wendall Freeman, Paul Diggs, Samuel Ling, Harry McGregor and Zach joined him.

"I don't think we can execute a coordinated attack against two large camps. We have a diverse group, the Aztecs and ourselves. What I would like to do is blow the bridge and execute two separate attacks. That way neither reaver gang can support the other, the explosions will confuse them and we can bug out if something goes wrong without worrying about running into another group. I would like to hit them when a foraging party is out, but that leaves an unknown.

The noise and explosions and smoke would alert them and we would have to do this all over again.

We can bring a hundred and fifty troops to this; hopefully the Aztecs can do the same. That still leaves us outnumbered. From what you say, Juan, the total number of guards is about twenty-five, scattered in four static positions and three roving groups. Take those out and we cut down the odds.”

“Too bad we can’t get them on the bridge when we blow it,” said John Grenier.

“Maybe we can,” said Juan excitedly. “There is a signal for when one side needs support. The reaver we questioned was very eager to give us everything he knew. They had raided a chandlery and got a lot of flare guns. These are scattered all over town. If they need help, a flare is shot off.”

“How many would respond?” asked Ishar Sing.

“I don’t know. Sorry, I didn’t think to ask,” replied Juan.

“Here now. What about this,” Harry said. He went to one of the light boards and began drawing. “Here’s the lake,” he drew a squiggly, elongated oval. “Here’s the bridge,” a line across the lake. “Manson and Ganado,” depicted by small circles.

“Now, we start an attack on Ganado with the Aztecs and two troops. Another two troops takes the bridgehead on the eastern side. They set up machine guns traversing down the bridge and two more towards town, with mortars, maybe.

“In all that equipment from the Cavanaugh Cache there has to be some flares. We fire one or two and, when the Manson side swarms to help, the machine gun holds them. When they start to get too close or leave the bridge, we blow it. The other three troops and the rangers hit Manson, after the bridge blows.”

The other men studied the map and the drawing for a few minutes. Zach finally said, “I think it’s a good plan. The only question I have is: how do we blow the bridge? That’s a key component to the whole thing. If we don’t blow the bridge, then we have two squads trapped between the reavers and the rest scattered on both sides of a useable causeway.”

“I thought Juan said it was already wired,” said Paul Diggs.

“It may be wired, but where is the detonation box or plunger or whatever?” said Zach. “We need someone who has experience with explosives to be able to, in a split second, determine where the hookup is. And if something goes wrong, try to do something to set it right.”

Harry looked frustrated. “Does anybody know how to use explosives?” he asked.

“Okay. Let’s think,” said Andy Newman. “There’s the miners at Gold Cove. Don’t they work with explosives? Or the construction guys, they must do something.”

A throat was cleared in the group and a hand slowly rose above the crowd. John Grenier said in a soft voice, “I’ve worked with explosives. I was at Gold Cove until I moved to Gunnison. We used them to blast out redoubts at the mouth of the valleys.”

“Great,” shouted Harry. “See, nothing to it.”

“It may be nothing to you, but I want to hear what our resident expert thinks,” said Hans.

“Oh, I’d have to talk to the guys who saw the stuff. Juan, where are they?”

Juan offered to take him to Andy and Jesse. The two men left and the rest began to fine tune Harry’s plan. When they had it worked out, assuming a hundred Aztecs, Julius Rosaia suggested that they have a Plan B, in case this one wasn’t feasible, for some reason.

Plan B called for the taking of one end of the bridge with three troops and six machine guns, so they could keep the two gangs separate. Everyone would attack Manson and try to

eliminate the reavers there. After Manson was secured, they would initiate an attack on Ganado. Mortars would be used to try and damage the bridge surface to slow down or prevent a mounted charge. This last was added to Plan A, as a refinement.

John and Juan returned at this point. John stepped up to the group, more confident than when he had left. “From the description from Andy and Jesse, they are using standard C-6. It is a newer version of the old C-4. It’s a faster explosive, so it gives more power to the blast. From their description, there is enough of this stuff, not only to blow the bridge, but also to obliterate it. They made the common mistake that novices make. They figure that if some is good, more is better. The reavers used full bricks, rather than cutting it and spreading it out.

“Anyone setting this stuff off had better be in a deep ditch a hundred yards away and hope the falling stuff misses them. If they don’t open their mouths and cover their ears, they could still have busted eardrums

“Wow,” said Zach. “So, what do you need to do this right and not get blown up with the bridge?”

John requested as detailed a map as was available, preferably one with contours. While the map was being tracked down, he wrote down a list of supplies he would need. When he was done, the list was run across to Chanda Singh.

The parks and recreation map was pinned to the board and John studied it. The ground was flat at both ends of the bridge. The only possibility was that the county and private roads had ditches, but they were five hundred yards from the bridge. If the bridgehead was pressed too closely, there wasn’t time to get the machine gunners to safety before the bridge had to be blown. If the gunners were called back too soon, there was a chance that the reavers could get over the

bridge with enough men to ruin the plan, or, worse still, discover the detonation wire and cut it, preventing the bridge from being blown at all.

“Gentlemen, there is nothing to worry about,” said Ishar Singh. “I will blow the bridge.”

“That’s fine, Ishar,” said Hans, thinking it was another of Ishar’s demands that the Sikhs’ be allowed on the front line in every attack. “It doesn’t matter who pushes the button, what does matter is pushing the button and not getting blown up.”

“Ah, no. You misunderstand my understanding. I will stay at the bridge, with two of my men and we will operate the machine gun and blow the bridge. I realize that we will be killed.” He grinned and said, “Just make us a fine monument and make sure our names are cut deep to last for a thousand years, huh?”

This statement stunned the rest. No one said anything for a few seconds. They argued with him, but he was adamant. Unless they could find another way, his decision was made.

Chanda Singh hobbled in during the heated argument and asked who wanted the materiel on the list. John admitted that he did and was asked if he wanted some explosives, also. When he was told no, Chanda muttered about blowing up nothing and hobbled out, leaving the list on the table.

When John picked it up a neat hand had written figures next to each item. “There’s enough det cord, goggles, wire, timers, portable boats and igniters for the job. In addition, there were artillery ear covers for twenty-five men and another hundred shooter ear covers.”

“Why the timers?” asked Wendell.

“Well, unless Ishar Singh wants to blow himself up, I had a thought. To give me time to do my work, an advance group is going to have to quietly take the bridgehead, pretend to be the reavers, in case anyone shows, and set up the ambush. Send in Fourth Rangers for the job. I’ll

go with them. The minute we take the guards, I will squelch once on my hand radio. They are waterproof, so if I have to get into the water, they'll still work. When I have the wiring done, I will squelch twice. That's the signal to start the ball rolling.

"Meanwhile, we replace the guards, that's two to four men. The others start digging. They will have about a half hour to make whatever hole they can. We will have one or two of the portable aluminum boats with us; they take those, collapse them and cover the hole. This will be Ishar's hidey-hole. I will put the timer at fifteen seconds from the time the button is pushed. Whoever pushes the button will have fifteen seconds to get to the hole, pull the cover, get their ear protectors on, open their mouths and say a very short prayer."

"That is, if Ishar Sing is not insistent on becoming a martyr."

The big Sikh threw his arms around John and gave him a bear hug. "Though I would like my name engraved in the stone pillar of a hero, I will forego it this time, my friend."

The troop leaders were given their marching orders and the Fifth Rangers set out to scout the meeting site. The rest of the men would move at first light. Hans apologized to Juan for not letting him get the rest he and his men deserved. Juan grinned and told him that they wouldn't want to miss for anything.

The meeting broke up, followed by a flurry of activity. Last minute supplies were loaded on pack mules. They decided that the trucks wouldn't be suitable for cross-country travel. John Grenier's supplies were packed separately.

They set out the next morning and arrived at the rendezvous two days later. The Aztecs had already set up camp. The pavilion and furnishings were ready and Zach, Hans and Robert Agnello met General Morales, Senor Cristobal and a stranger who sported a neat Van Dyke. He was introduced as First Minister Alphonso Rodrigo. They sat and, after a wordy speech by the

First Minister, expressing friendship, cooperation, etc., etc., they signed the treaty, after Robert Agnello read both copies carefully.

“And the prisoners?” asked Zach mildly.

The General smiled and replied, “They are on the other side of the hill. There are nearly five hundred”

“Zach, why don’t you go see to them while I talk to the General about the operation,” suggested Hans.

Zach nodded and, with Robert in tow, he rode out with Senor Cristobal to meet the refugees. He wondered about the number and where they would be absorbed. Mitchell, Eagle, Big Valley, Black Valley, Beaver Valley were fully occupied. Rio Grande was reaching its maximum population point and Palo Verde didn’t have the land or water to support that number of people. Gunnison could take more, but not the whole number. He discussed with Robert the need for a new settlement and they threw around a few ideas for a good location. Zach wanted to establish it further south, between Gunnison and Palo Duro, another link in the chain. Robert agreed and suggested Santa Fe or Taos or Trinidad. They put the discussion on hold as they entered the tent city set up for the refugees.

The men, women and children were dressed in anything from rags to gowns and suits. The only thing they had in common was the look of fear and worry on every face. Even the children were somber and quiet. There was a large tent in the center that was used as a communal kitchen. Latrines and a garbage dump were located on the south side of camp, where the hillside sloped. A group of men and women were standing in front of the mess tent. As Zach’s party rode up, everyone uncovered their heads and bowed.

This, obviously trained behavior, disturbed Zach. He looked briefly at Robert, whose lips were a compressed, white line. Zach looked back at the crowd, which had been growing steadily. “My name is Zach Banducci. I, along with Robert Agnello, represent the state of Jefferson. We have just completed a treaty with the Aztecs and you are part of that agreement. The deal was to free all Anglo prisoners and any Hispanic from north of the border, kidnapped in a raid.”

Suddenly, one of the women forced her way forward. She was holding the hands of two young children. “Why have you taken us from our family? What gives you the right?”

Zach was taken aback. He looked at Robert for help, but saw he was as surprised as Zach was. Juan Ojeda was used to translate questions from Zach to Senor Cristobal. It quickly came to light that a group of the women had been happily married, south of the border. They had been separated from their new life because they were covered under the treaty.

“We can’t take them if they don’t want to go,” whispered Robert.

“You’re right there.”

He turned back to the crowd and the angry woman, standing with her arms akimbo. Several other women had joined her when they saw that she wasn’t being punished for her temerity.

“You are all here under the auspices of the treaty just signed by our governments,” began Robert. “We insisted on this to be assured that no one would be coerced to stay where they didn’t want. We will provide those who would like to return to the Aztec Empire with the supplies and means to do so, after signing a paper to that effect. If anyone can give us the names and addresses of your next of kin, we will inform them of your decision.”

“There was a rumbling as the message was passed through the crowd. When it had died down, Robert continued, “Tomorrow morning, I and a representative of the Empire will begin the process of taking names and desired dispositions. In the meantime, there will be several wagons of supplies brought in. Do you have someone in charge?”

A big man, covered in scars, shoved his way forward. “Me and my men are in charge,” he said, indicating a half dozen other, some with clubs grasped in their hands.

“What makes you in charge?” asked Zach, noticing the fearful looks the men received from the crowd and the space around them, even in a packed crowd.

“We said so, didn’t we?” he answered with a sneer. He looked around, “Anyone want to argue about it? No? See, we are in charge.”

Zach asked Senor Cristobal, through Juan, about the organization of the camp, but only received a shrug in reply, indicating that it was no concern of his.

Zach turned back to the big man and hooked his knee over his saddle horn. Immediately the men at his back tensed. “Who are you, exactly?” Zach asked quietly.

“I’m William Stark, pit boss of level six, mine eight. What I say goes, whether in the mines or in this camp. See.” He jutted out his chin daring Zach to do something about it.

Zach explained the laws of Jefferson, not to Stark, but to the others around them. He spoke for several minutes, Stark growing increasingly restless. He felt the situation was getting away from him and he shouted, “Enough of this talk. I don’t care about your laws, I make the law in this camp and my law says I’m in charge.” He took a slow turn, looking for dissent. When he looked back at Zach, he was staring into the barrel of Zach’s Webley.

Now, William,” he said, purposely provoking the man. “You are under new management. Our laws are what you will follow and our laws are based on the Constitution of

the United States of America. Our laws say you are not in charge until you are elected in a secret ballot.”

“Put that popgun away and I’ll show you what I think of your constitution,” he said, angrily.

“So, you don’t want to follow our constitution and become an upstanding member of our society? Willing to work for the common good? Is that what I am hearing, William.”

William replied with an expletive and Zach shot him in the chest, drawing cries from the crowd. Stark had a surprised look on his face as he died. After he had collapsed, Zach nudged his horse towards the group of Stark’s henchmen. The crowd parted before him until he was face to face with them. “Now, who is in charge of this camp?” he asked the men.

Of the dozen, all but three looked relieved to drop their weapons and edge back into the crowd. One of the others, as big and scarred as William Stark was said, “Okay, you’re in charge. Is that how you settle disputes under your constitution?”

Zach put his gun away and looked back at the man. “Nope. Rarely, but Willie boy wasn’t about to back down. Now, we could have given him back to the Aztecs, but I really don’t think they would want him, do you?”

“We could have exiled him, but he would have just joined one of the reaver gangs and we would have to deal with him later. Willie was one of those people who believed that a rock-hard fist gives you power over people. He would never have changed. Maybe, it was his upbringing; maybe it was how he learned in the mines. I don’t know and I am not liberal enough to want to try to get him long-term psychological help.

“These days there are sheep, wolves and sheepdogs. Willie was a wolf. He was never going to be anything other than a wolf. I am a sheepdog, though sometimes I am a sheep. The question is: what are you?”

“Think about it. Tomorrow I’ll ask again. If you decide you are a wolf, then I’ll let you take permanent exile. You will get a week’s supply of food, a horse and a weapon and a box of ammunition.

“In the meantime, you and everyone else in the camp are under sheepdog law. My law. You break that law and there is no higher court than me,” he finished, looking at the other man.

“Fine. I’ll let you know tomorrow, then,” said the man. He started to turn away when Zach asked him, “What’s your name, old son?”

“Karl, Karl Weatherby.”

“Well, Karl Weatherby, I have a job for you. You and your men are in charge of security, tonight. However, if there is a report of trouble, a rape, a murder, robbery of any kind, even shoving some kid and knocking it down, I will hang every one of you. Without a list of witnesses as long as your arm, don’t let anything happen, understand?”

Karl gave Zach a puzzled look. “And if I don’t agree?”

“Then exile tonight, right now. A horse, a gun and a week’s supply of food. Your choice. Oh, and bury Willie first thing, will you?”

“Like I said, I’ll let you know tomorrow.”

On the ride back Robert questioned the wisdom of putting Karl in charge. Zach told him that foxes make the best guards in a henhouse, as long as they realize the ramifications of failure. “Besides,” he continued, “eight of the Twelfth Rangers have on their best refugee garb and will be keeping an eye on our boys. They all are armed and have orders to shoot, if necessary.”

Robert laughed, “Foxes make the best guards, but it’s always best to watch the foxes, huh?”

“Yup, and it keeps the real guards out of sight.”

Robert rode to his tent to prepare for the morning. He had a list of the returned prisoners from which he was working and needed to organize it. Zach reported to Hans and gave him a rundown of the situation in the camp, including his run in with Willie Stark. Hans shrugged his shoulders and commented that Zach liked to talk too much and he should have shot him the first time Stark opened his mouth.

Hans called the officers together and had Zach give a briefing on the refugees. Then he went over his conversation with General Morales. The Aztecs had brought eighty-three men, six light machine guns and the agreed upon supplies. The men looked to be the dregs of every post and unit in the Empire.

“They are a sad lot, but they are all that were provided. We’ll put them at the point of attack so we can keep an eye on them. General Morales agrees. He doesn’t have any more respect for them than we do. Tomorrow, we leave Robert here with Seventeen Troop and the wagons. He can sort out what is needed and bring in those who want to stay with us. I’ll have Cristobal and Rodrigo stay here until Robert finishes and they can escort those that want to return to the Empire back to San Antonio.

“The Aztec settlers there will be ready to leave as soon as we return from the expedition. The General and his men will then escort them to the new border. We leave tomorrow at sundown. From here on out we march at night, no fires during the day and strong patrols. We want to be a complete surprise; we have to be a complete surprise.

“Fifth Rangers left this morning. We will use the message locator system as before. They will leave messages daily, whether there is any news or not. The code on the note will tell us if there is a problem.”

He went over the squelch signals for the actual attack. When he was sure that they had it memorized, he asked for questions. When there were none, the meeting dispersed and the officers went to see about their men.

Hans sent a couple of supply wagons to the refugee camp. They would provide food and blankets for the night.

Morning dawned bright, but cold. There were still brisk winds driving from the north, though it warmed up by ten o'clock. Zach wandered over to see how things had gone the night before and found that Karl has three men tied to a cottonwood. As Zach and Robert rode up, Karl stepped out of the crowd and walked to the tree. Zach followed him and Robert rode toward the mess tent, where the last of the dishes were being washed.

At the tree, Karl jabbed his club into the stomach of a thin, sallow man with close-cropped hair. “This one tried to steal a blanket.” He jabbed the next on, “Tried to rape a ten-year old girl.” The third man was slapped, “This bastard tried to sneak out a girl to one of the Aztecs. Said he was returning her to her rightful owner.

“I got witnesses. Want to hear them?”

“Yeah. Send them to that tent there and you and your boys stay here and guard these dangerous men.” Karl grinned and shouted for the witnesses. While he was doing this, one of his men gave him a small nod, indicating that Karl had told him the truth.

“On second thought, Karl. I’ll take your word on this. We sheepdogs have to stick together, don’t we?” Zach thought that seeing the look on Karl’s face was more than enough reward for his trust of the tough.

“As Justice of the Peace, I can preside over the trials. Bring out a table and fifteen chairs or benches for the jury, accused, and you and I.”

He selected twelve men and women as jurors and the trial was held. The thief was sentenced to permanent banishment. He was to be held, chained to the tree, but not abused, until Robert agreed to his release. The other two were hung, left until the afternoon and buried in unmarked graves.

Zach stayed around the processing tent for the rest of the day, helping where he could. There were no incidents and the refugees were marked as bound for San Antonio, for the Bear Flag Republic or other allied states; the Fundamentalists or to join Jefferson. They would all be taken to Palo Duro and dispersed from there. The last group was to be shuttled up to Gunnison as quickly as possible. The Council would be radioed that a new community would be needed to absorb the refugees.

That evening, Robert gave them the rundown on the prisoners. Of the four hundred and eighty-six, forty-two wanted to return to the Empire; one hundred and five were going back to the west coast or Mormons and fifty-two were headed to the Fundamentalists. Of the remaining one hundred and eighty-seven, there were forty-three men, one hundred and twenty-three women and one hundred and twenty-one children. Of the children, forty-eight were orphans.

“Thank goodness this is not our problem,” said Harry. “The Council is going to have to find a new settlement and that is about it.”

General Morales appeared, with his staff, and the final marching plans discussed. The route would take them down US84 to I-20 to Texas 36 to US77 to Texas 111. They would wait at the junction of Texas 111 and CR-1 until they had confirmation that there were no raiders out.

Harry would wait a day and take Nine, Fourteen, Sixteen Troops and Fourth and Fifth Rangers and continue down 111. He would hold a mile from Manson until it was time to attack. Hans would take General Morales and the Aztecs, Four and Eleven Troops to Texas 71 and down to Ganado, also holding them a mile from the town. Ishar Singh, with Thirteen and Nineteen Troops would take back roads to US59. He would also hold a mile from the highway. When he got the squelch signal, he was to advance slowly until spotted; then ride hard for the bridgehead and set up the plug. John Grenier with Ninth Rangers and the boats would take Rose Ranch Road and put the boats in the water and paddle around the peninsula; down to the bridge; take out the guards and start work on the explosives.

“John, the minute you can, signal to start the attack. The longer the men are sitting out there waiting, the better chance of this operation blowing up in our faces,” said Hans. “This is way too complicated for my taste, but it is the best plan we have.”

An hour later, the rangers forming a screen around the column, they set out.

Chapter 22

The Expedition: Execution

Spring 2046

I agree with Hans, this is way too complicated, but, if we want to destroy this reaver band, it is the best we got. When Sarah finds out about this, she is going to kill me, if I don't get killed in the fight. Hans is really stepping into Carl's shoes.

More people and a new settlement. I would like to spread the refugees out more. The Gunnison settlement is still not integrated enough, though sending Thirteen and Eighteen and the Mechanized Six Troops there has brought in non-Kansans to leaven the mix, but I would like more mixing.

I like Karl Weatherby. I found out that he was a mercenary for the Aztecs before getting busted for knocking around a governor's son. He was a Green Beret, in the old army. Could use him to train troops in hand to hand, take over that from Carl Smythe.

Well, the light isn't too good and I need my beauty sleep.

The nights were spent in travel and the days in hiding. The messages were picked up and there was no hint of trouble. They bypassed the few ranches, farms and settlements they encountered. The Aztecs began grumbling about the lack of hot food, but General Morales spoke to them.

Juan translated the speech. The General started by calling them the dregs of the Empire; sent here to win or die. The General Staff had little faith in them. They were cowards, deserters, shirkers and scum. He went on to tell them that he was in the same class as they were, sent to San Antonio to wither and die in an out of the way post. He was considered a coward and inept

for his loss to the Mormons. He vowed, however, to show them of what he was made. To show them that he was not what they thought. He challenged the men to prove them wrong, also. Show that they were men, not scum; brave, not cowards; fighters, not shirkers or deserters. As a carrot, he told them of the loot that must be in Manson and Ganado. He told them they would return to the Empire covered in glory and riches.

They cheered him and there was a new spring in their step and pride in their uniforms and weapons. Hans hoped it would last longer than the next meal. It did. There were no more desertions after the speech, though eleven men had run off before.

They reached the junction of Texas 111 and CR-1 to find a message that said that the raiders had returned the night before and all of the reavers were accounted for. It also gave the routes and times of the roaming patrols, which were consistent, day-to-day.

The last council was called and Hans ran over the schedule again. The Ninth Rangers were to put boats in the water and Harry and Ishar Singh would move up to their pre-attack positions. John would triple squelch when he had the explosives wired and that was the signal for the attack. Each would return squelches to signify they were ready. Hans, four times, Ishar Singh, three times and Harry, twice. Five squelches from anybody was the signal for the attack to be called off. They shook hands and wished each other good luck. Within minutes, the troopers had moved out.

Zach rode with Harry and they waited for the rest of the day, moving out the next evening. They reached their post, joining the Fifth Rangers, and set out sentries. One of the roving patrols was due in the area around noon, and they wanted to be sure that they weren't spotted. In the worst case, Zach and four others, armed with sniper rifles would take the patrol out, if necessary, killing their mounts, also.

Ishar Singh wended his way through back roads to US59. Several times he had to backtrack as he found bridges down. He was in an angry state of mind by the time he got to his position, afraid that he would be late and have to give the abort signal. However, he arrived at dawn of the second day and ordered his men to dismount and rest.

Hans pushed hard and reached the town the same time as Ishar Singh arrived at his designated position. A patrol would ride out at dusk and he had snipers in position to intercept them.

John and his men rode down Rose Ranch Road. They were concerned that the ranch would be occupied, but it was deserted. They found the embarkation point and stripped and hobbled the horses and mules. They assembled the boats and loaded the equipment. While they were doing this, John sent David Franco and Mitchell Grimes to the point to watch. They would be picked up when the rest of the party reached them. At dusk, they set out, paddling quietly. The moon had not risen, but they were able to see, using night vision goggles.

They picked up David and Mitchell and continued down the lake, hugging the eastern shore. As the sliver of moon rose, they dropped off Armando Fuentes, the sniper in the unit. He sighted in on the group around the fire at the east end of the bridge, but signaled that he couldn't get clean shots. He moved up the bank and advanced on the fire overland, while the remaining members softly paddled to the bridge. Juan Ojeda and the Rangers crept up the bank and shot the guards with silenced weapons. They dragged the bodies under the bridge and three of the rangers donned the coats and hats of the sentries and took their place around the fire.

The other six rangers unloaded the boats, collapsed them and pulled them up the bank to where the bolthole was to be dug. They attacked the rocky ground with a will and soon had a six foot long, by six foot wide by three foot deep hole dug, covered by the boats and the boats

covered with dirt and brush. A space had been left at the head of the cover in which to allow the gunners and Ishar Singh to slide. Juan Ojeda practiced running the fifteen yards and made it in the time that would be allowed. With the hole dug, they set up the light machine gun that was part of their equipment and waited for John to finish.

John, meanwhile, ignored the activity of the rangers and began working on the explosives. He bypassed the existing switch and spliced det cord to use as the new wire. He ran the cord to the original trigger box and wired it to timers and the timers to the trigger box. He then ran cord to the other side of the bridge and wired it in. He had enough cord to create a backup line from the south side of the bridge and he wired it with a timer and one of the triggers he had brought with him.

When he was finished, he squelched the radio three times, waited five minutes and squelched three times, again. He then joined Juan and the rest of the rangers, giving them thumbs up. Getting his weapon, he lined up four clips in front of him and waited for Ishar Singh.

From Ganado, movement could be seen. There were three figures staggering down the road towards the bridge. They were passing a bottle back and forth. They came to the guard post and stopped to talk to the guards. They never got a chance; they were shot from several directions with silenced pistols. The bodies were dragged down to join the real guards.

As the minutes dragged on, the tension grew. Finally, they heard the squelch patterns they were looking for. Fifteen minutes later, Ishar Singh and his men quietly rode down the road to the bridgehead.

They quickly deployed, throwing up earthworks as they dug foxholes. Three machine guns were emplaced facing Ganado; two more covering the bridge. John dissuaded Ishar Singh

from directing a mortar towards the bridge. He didn't want a misdirected explosion setting off the C-6 prematurely. Both mortars were aligned towards Ganado, instead.

Hans had given Ishar Singh a half hour to reach the bridge and dig in. He began his attack with mortars and rocket propelled grenades. The purpose was to confuse, more than cause any casualties. Soon, machine gun and automatic rifle fire joined in.

John raised the flare gun and fired. The red light burst in the sky and slowly drifted down to the lake. Another followed the first flare.

The firing from Ganado intensified. Lights were seen across the bridge as the Manson group reacted to the flares. The guards at the western end appeared first and were cut down. The next wave was stopped by machine gun fire and the survivors took cover against the side of the bridge and returned fire. More and more reavers arrived and the return fire intensified, causing several casualties among the defenders at the eastern end of the bridge.

When Chanda Singh, in charge of the troopers facing Ganado, saw figures heading towards them, he ordered the machine guns to fire a burst over their heads. The fire was followed by shrieks and screams and the figures fell to the ground. They were women from the town. Chanda detailed several men to get them out of the line of fire and to check them for weapons. They were to be taken up the side road and hidden in a gully. The men were warned to search them thoroughly and be alert for trouble. If any more arrived, they were to do the same with them.

The pressure from the bridge became intense and Ishar Singh began ordering his men to fall back towards Ganado and find cover. Soon, all that remained were Ishar Singh and the two machine gunners. He ordered them to head for the hole and, when they began sprinting off, he pressed the buttons as John instructed and ran after them. They slid into the protective hole and

tugged the cover over the gap. They put on their ear protectors and opened their mouths as the ground heaved and bucked. After a few seconds, a large chunk of the bridge landed on the cover, denting the aluminum and collapsing the hole. They choked on the dirt and fought to escape the trap.

All firing stopped at the sight and sound of the explosion. The world seemed to go calm and still. Then the lake was churned with the falling debris. The bridge was gone. The only remains were small sections at each end. Fortunately for the troopers, a light breeze blew the dust and smoke of the explosion away. They were able to return to the bridgehead and pull the three half-buried men out of the hole.

Ishar Singh, dazed and with a broken arm, ordered the machine guns and mortars to be positioned against Ganado. More refugees from the town appeared and were shuttled off to the gully with the others. Soon, however, armed men appeared and they were shot down. More appeared and milled and finally threw down their weapons and surrendered.

They were ordered to come forward, slowly and their hands were bound and they were sent out on the small length of bridge remaining. Two machine guns were set up and trained on them. They were warned to sit and that anyone standing would be shot, immediately.

Desultory fire was heard from the town as Hans searched the buildings for holdouts. His troopers began bringing more prisoners to the bridge.

On the other side of the lake, Harry had met slight resistance. Most of the reavers from Manson had ridden for the bridge when the flares had gone up. At the explosion, Harry and his troopers had attacked the town. The few remaining reavers had been easily overcome and the town secured with light casualties. The rangers were hunting escapees. Harry and Zach rode to the bridge and drove the survivors back to the bridgehead, where they surrendered. Zach

squelched twice to signal that their part of the operation was complete. Ishar Sing replied and managed to launch the one salvaged boat.

The boat was rowed across and Harry and Zach embarked and were rowed back. They met Hans and Ishar Singh on the far bank and Hans detailed his part in the action.

He had attacked and met some resistance, but when the flares had gone up, the reavers in Ganado, apparently, took that for the signal to get across the bridge to Manson. They retreated through town and fought a rear guard action until the bridge blew.

It appeared that this was a signal that every man was for himself and the resistance dissolved. Many of them surrendered and the rest are on foot, with no food or supplies. Hans had immediately moved the reavers' horses several miles to the south in order to keep them out of the hands of escapees.

There had been some trouble with the Aztecs, but, after General Morales had had several shot for looting, the trouble had stopped. The civilians were brought into Ganado and locked in the jail and council chambers of the courthouse and guards posted.

Guards were also posted around on the prisoners at the bridge and around the town. The rest of the men were ordered to get some sleep. The medics set up a field hospital and treated the wounded on both sides. The officers met in council.

They had taken forty prisoners. The rest of the reavers had been killed or had escaped. The town was locked down to prevent looting. The civilians had been secured. General Morales was congratulated on the fine performance of his men. They had led the attack and taken the brunt of the few casualties. They agreed that they should contact the 'serfs' in the area and meet with their leaders, if there were any. The execution of the reavers would take place as soon as possible. The civilians under guard would be provided an escort to their homes. The Aztecs

would be given first choice of the loot in Ganado, limited to what they could carry. The rest would be divided between the civilians and Jefferson. Anything in dispute would be burned. When the discussion ended, they turned in to get as much rest for the busy days ahead of them.

Chapter 23

The Expedition: Aftermath

Spring 2046

Another battle and tomorrow, retribution and, hopefully, a new beginning.

The allies woke up to the full extent of the destruction. In the daylight, the casualties were collected and arrayed on East York Street. The reavers were laid on the south side of the street and the Troopers and Aztecs, covered by tarps and blankets, on the other. Zach lifted each covering and looked each trooper and Aztec in the face. When he got to the end of the line of thirty-nine bodies, he stood and said a silent prayer. He ignored the ninety or more bodies of the reavers.

Hans had ordered troopers to collect the weapons and essential supplies and store them in the wagons used by the reavers. The Aztec troops were assigned to guard the prisoners. General Morales assured them that the town would be turned over to them to loot as soon as the weapons, foodstuffs, medicines and alcohol were secured. The troopers searched the stores and those houses used by the reavers. It took two days to canvass the town thoroughly. Two other troops were performing the same function in Manson, though the task was easier with the much smaller size of the town. The prisoners and civilians had been brought over on the Texas 111 bridge. This bridge was in much worse shape than the destroyed bridge and it took most of the day to cross.

While the troopers were scavenging and the prisoners from the west side were being transported, Zach, Hans and General Morales interviewed the Ganado prisoners. There were several men in the group who explained their presence as deliverymen. When the women were interviewed, they contradicted this story. The men were allied to the reavers and reported on

women, food production and performed other services for the gang. They had been in town for the celebration of the latest raid.

Zach had them moved to the bridge with the other reaver prisoners. He also had several of the women moved there, after learning that they were not 'skags' but willing participants.

During the interviews, several men arrived in town. They were farmers and ranchers from the area. They were anxious to meet the leaders of the allied forces. Zach had them brought in. They were fearful, at first, until Zach reassured them that they had not exchanged one set of masters for another.

Their story was short and to the point. The area had been taken over by the reavers and the rest of the population had lived in virtual servitude. They supplied food and women to the reavers in exchange for their lives. Several aborted attempts to throw off the reaver yoke had resulted in the slaughter of the ringleaders.

Zach explained about Jefferson and the reconstituted United States. He had the women prisoners brought in and the men identified those they knew. Several fell, weeping into the arms of fathers, husbands or brothers. Zach asked their leader, Jeremiah Hopkins, to spread the word in the district that all families should send a representative to a meeting in the town hall in a week's time. There, they would discuss the future of the Lake Texana Area. He turned whoever desired, over to the men to be returned to their families. He also gave them a wagon full of reaver weapons and ammunition to distribute, warning them that an unknown number had escaped.

When they had left, he brought the rest of the women into the chambers and gave them the choice to stay in the area, go with the Aztecs, be sent home or return with the troopers to Jefferson and settle there.

Of the forty-three women, eighteen wanted to return to the Empire, nineteen expressed a desire to return to the Fundamentalists and the remaining six would return with the troopers to Jefferson. When the prisoners from Manson appeared they were given the same choice and nearly all of the sixty women wanted to return to the Empire. Several of those women told tales of being kidnapped and sold into slavery by government officials in Brownsville, Laredo, El Paso and other border towns. General Morales' face darkened at this news and he promised a full investigation when he returned.

The remaining women opted to travel back to the Fundamentalists. Zach informed them that they would have to accompany them back to Jefferson, from where they would be sent to Raphael for repatriation.

Next, Hans asked to see the casualty report. Four and Thirteen Troops and Fourth Rangers had lost a man apiece. The trooper from Thirteen had died when his horse had stepped in a hole and thrown him, breaking his neck. Nineteen Troop lost two, one knifed by a reaver woman while he was searching her. Eleven Troop and Ninth Rangers lost three men each and Sixteen Troop suffered six casualties. The Aztecs had twenty-one men killed. Nine and Fourteen Troops and Fourth Rangers suffered no casualties. There were several men crippled in the fight, but the casualties had been light due to the surprise and confusion over the flares. Neither attacking force had to engage in house-to-house fighting, which would have driven the casualty count higher.

The last order of business was the disposition of the prisoners. The three leaders of the expedition rode to the bridge to confront the reavers. The sixty sullen men and women stared at them. They had not been fed or given water and many were sitting dejectedly on the bridge,

their hands bound. One of them had managed to saw the ties apart on the rough concrete, but had been shot when he stood to run. There had been no further escape attempts.

Zach asked if any of them were leaders of the gang, but he received no reply. However, several of the men had looked directly at a small, compact man with a short, neat beard. Zach had him brought forward. “You a leader? If you’re not, then there is no reason to keep you alive, is there?”

“So what if I am?”

“So, we have some questions for you, that’s what,” returned Zach. “The first one is how many men were there in Manson and Ganado last night?”

“Why should I tell you?” he said with a sneer.

Zach kicked him between the legs and the man collapsed, groaning. “Pick him up,” Zach ordered two of the Aztec guards. General Morales translated and the man was roughly pulled to his feet.

“Same question,” Zach said.

“Almost two hundred in Manson, a hundred and sixty in Ganado. Help me, you crippled me.”

Zach said, “Good. I wouldn’t want you adding to the gene pool, anyway.” He turned from the man and called a trooper over. He took the clipboard from the trooper and read the list aloud, “We have forty prisoners from Ganado. There are ninety-three bodies in Ganado. That leaves between twenty and thirty escapees. We pulled one hundred and thirty bodies from the lake; there were twenty-two bodies in Manson and twenty prisoners. That leaves another twenty or twenty-five as escapees. But there are more bodies on the bottom of the lake, I imagine, so

let's say between fifteen and twenty escapees. That means there are thirty-five or forty reavers running around."

Hans called over Juan Ojeda and instructed him to take all of the rangers and make a complete sweep of the area and run the escapees to ground. He was to take radios in case he needed to call for reinforcements.

When he departed, the two men turned back to the prisoner, who had gotten over the immediate shock of the kick. Zach scratched his nose and asked, "Do you know General March?"

The man started to answer, hesitated and said, "Yeah, Billy took orders from him."

"Go on."

"Nothing, just stay away from you bastards. Do whatever we wanted to the Jesus Freaks and Greasers."

Zach slapped him twice, forehand and backhand, rattling his teeth. "A little more respect, old son. Now, how did this Billy get his orders?"

The small man shot a look of hatred at Zach, turned his head and spat blood. "We get a rider in now and again."

"Is the man here, now?" asked Zach.

"Yeah, he's the big one with the scar. Sitting over there by the rail."

Zach shoved the small man and sent him back towards the other prisoners. He pointed to the scar faced man and asked the guards to bring him forward.

"You're General March's man?" he asked.

"Yeah, and I know who you are. I was a friend of Red's and I'm going to kill you."

"Why are all of you guys so threatening? Are there any more of March's boys here?"

“Tony. The skinny guy in black.”

Scar Face was sent back and Tony brought forward. “I’m going to save your life, Tony. I’m going to send you with a message to General March. It’s real simple. Just tell him that Texas is west of the Mississippi. That makes it my territory. Got it?”

“Uh, yeah. Texas is west of the Mississippi. Your territory,” he answered eagerly.

Zach ordered him cut loose and given a horse and a week’s supplies.

As Tony was led off, Scar Face shouted, “Hey, what about me?”

Zach gave him an amused look and shouted back, “He didn’t say he was going to kill me.”

The three leaders stood in a group and discussed the reavers’ fate. It was unanimous to execute them. General Morales wanted to wait until the local citizenry gathered, but Zach and Hans overrode him. “Hanging is not a pretty sight. It is messy as well as ugly. There’s a long enough stretch of bridge left to form a gallows. I say hang them and leave them there, if the people want to see them,” Hans said.

Enough rope was found to do the job and nooses were prepared. The prisoners began struggling, but it was no use. Most sat on the rail stoically with the noose around their necks. Some shouted curses and had to be restrained. Others cried and begged, offering anything to be spared. Three were released and questioned and, when the information about treasure or weapons caches or supply caches had been gleaned, they were returned to the bridge. Troopers and Aztecs shoved or threw them over and put an end to their lives.

The wagons had been loaded with weapons, liquor, food, medical supplies and other items that Zach, Hans and General Morales felt were important. The Aztecs were assembled and told that the town was theirs under the following conditions. No fire or destruction, no fighting

and only as much as they could carry in their arms or on their bodies. Anyone breaking these rules, and they would join the reavers on the bridge. They were given two hours.

He sent them off and they yipped like children as they ran into town. “It was a good thought to take the liquor, though I imagine there is some in the houses of the town your men didn’t search. Hopefully, they will be too interested in the jewelry, clothes and trinkets that are left.

Soon they began staggering back, bent under the loads of loot. They carried clothes, furniture, tools, hats, sports equipment, electronics and, it seemed, everything not nailed down. One man arrived pushing a bed and begged the General to let him bring it home to his mother, who was sleeping on a mat on the floor. The general nodded and suggested that he find more wheels, since he was going to have to push it home. The man lifted one corner of the bed, removed a wheel and raced back into town, returning an hour later with his pockets bulging with replacement wheels.

When the men were finished, they began to offer the troopers part of their loot in exchange for their backpacks or bags. Zach, who had foreseen this, opened one wagon and began handing out one pack to each man.

The sweep by the rangers had raised the body count by eighteen, while they suffered two casualties themselves. Fourth and Ninth Rangers each lost a man.

The next day the troopers were buried. It was a solemn service with Zach presiding. A few of the locals had arrived in town and they stood respectfully by as the role of the dead was recited by Zach in a loud, clear voice. First the twenty-one names of the Aztec troopers were read, then the names of the Jefferson troopers.

Ed Jones, 4th; Paul Moss, 11th; Bob Peligrino, 11th; Edward Winslow, 11th; Lester Macon, 13th; Bobby Edwards, 16th; Aiden Quinn, 16th, John Tipitt, 16th, Gregory Cavanaugh, 16th; Ram Singh, 16th, Tom Wilkins, 16th; Carl Williams, 19th, William Soleto, 19th; Jimmy Finkle, 4th R, Winston Compton, 5th R; David Franco, 9th R; Orson Corley, 9th R; Armando Fuentes, 9th R; Miguel Torres, 9th R.

The ceremony ended and the crowd dispersed. Zach approached the locals and said, “The meeting isn’t for five more days, sir.”

The man introduced himself, nervously shaking hands. “I’m Lem Thompson. I needed some things from town and came in early.” He held up his rifle and thanked Zach for passing them out.

“How many of these bastards you figure got away?” he asked.

“Fifteen to twenty-five, depending on how many are at the bottom of the lake,” Zach replied, walking with the group back to town.

“Well, you can scratch off two more. They came to my house, big as you please, demanding food and horses. We heard about the fight from Jeremiah when he gave me and my boys the guns. Bobby, my youngest, opened the door and I gave them three loads of the Remington 500, pump.”

Zach laughed, “Good for you.”

“Yep, drug the bodies into the arroyo. Let the coyotes and varmints have ‘em.”

Zach asked, “Just curious, but why do the stores in town have so much in them? I would figure that somebody would have looted them? Have you been around here long or what?”

“The stuff in the stores and houses wasn’t ours,” the old farmer said in surprise. “There was only about six families left after the Troubles. We weren’t sure if anybody would be coming back, a lot of them run off, to get away from the sickness.

“We in the farms and ranches just come to town to get what we needed. When the, what you call ‘em, reavers showed up, they didn’t have no interest in women’s clothes and such, so we come in when we needed something and that Billy fella didn’t say nothing.

The rest of the day and into the week, locals trickled in. Some picked up items they needed and other just came in to see the bodies. Hans ordered the corpses piled in a lot in the burned section of town, south of Menefee Street. Troopers and locals tore down several sheds and piled the wood on the bodies and they were burned. By the time the expedition left, days of burning and reburning the bodies left nothing but ash, which was blown away by the southerly winds.

Word of further casualties among the escaped reavers came in with the locals. One here, two there, another fifteen were tracked down by the constant patrols or the local militia. There were atrocities, too. A farm was burned on the other side of Edna and the man and two young children murdered. Fifth Rangers tracked down the three reavers and brought the woman back.

Jeremiah Hopkins came in and Zach, Hans and General Morales sat with him and a couple of other community leaders. They explained the history of Jefferson and the conflicts with the reavers. Hans offered to take them with them when they returned to Jefferson. They were going to have to establish a new settlement and they would be welcome.

Jeremiah and the others said that they had been born and raised around Lake Texana and weren’t interested in moving. They agreed to propose it to the whole assembly in the morning.

The troopers were ordered to be ready to move the morning after the meeting. Supplies had been salvaged from the reaver warehouses and every trooper was permitted to 'requisition' a souvenir from the loot. The rest of the contents of the Manson and Ganado were left for the locals, if they decided to stay. If they decided to relocate, as many usable items as possible would be brought along.

The meeting opened with the introductions of the leaders of the expedition and Zach extended the invitation to relocate. There were no takers. The Texans felt that they would be prepared for any more trouble, now that they were armed and alert. They asked for some help and guidance in organizing and training their own militia and Harry agreed to stay for a month with Ninth Rangers.

They modeled their constitution on Jefferson's and thanked the expedition for removing their tormentors. That night, there was a celebration, with the Texans providing the cooking and treating the members of the expedition like kings.

The next morning, the expedition departed. The Aztecs struggled with their loot and General Morales refused to allow them to put any of it in the supply wagons. He was disappointed that Hans decided to leave the town and its goods in the possession of the Texans, but understood.

They would all travel to San Antonio to protect the depleted Aztec force. Hans also wanted to make sure that the San Antonio settlement was being dismantled. Along the route, General Morales relented and let his men store their spoils in the wagons. This was to speed up the march and keep straggling to a minimum.

When they reached San Antonio, they found the town deserted. Cristobal had kept his word and the settlement had been packed up and, presumably, led back to El Paso. General

Morales bade farewell and he and his men headed west. Hans turned north for the long trek to Palo Duro. It took several weeks and Zach performed a dozen weddings along the line of march.

They arrived at Palo Duro to find that the refugees had been sent to their home on the west coast or to Raphael and the Fundamentalists. A new settlement had been established near old Trinidad. This completed the line of communication from Mitchell to Palo Duro. The new town was the hub for a proposed lumber, fishing and coal operation. They had built a fortified area in the mountains back of town, called Helm's Deep after a fortress in some old book. It was stocked with enough supplies to last the defenders for months.

A memorial service was held in Palo Duro and the expedition started north, sending a message to Raphael that there were more refugees for him to repatriate. They visited the new town of Trinidad.

Karl Wetherby opted to join them and relocate in Mitchell. He said it was too boring, sitting around doing nothing and he didn't want to go down into a mine again and he wasn't interested in fishing or logging. He figured that it would be much more exciting being around Zach, who asked him not to repeat that to his wife.

The trip north was uneventful, to Karl's disappointment. They met Raphael, who expressed his gratitude for the rescue of the Fundamentalist women.

The detached scouts were camped by the side of the road. They had seen them the day before and decided to wait for them. The group was worn thin. They had three women with them, rescued from a small group of reavers. The women were happy to follow the rangers home.

When they arrived at the valley, the men were dismissed and the wagons brought to the commissary to be unloaded by One Troop. The troopers scattered to their homes and Carl met

Zach, Hans and Karl at the town hall, organizing a meeting to report. Though Carl was anxious to hear what had happened, beyond the radio messages, he simply welcomed them home.

Zach took Karl to the ranch, explaining about the horse- and cattle-breeding he was doing and his dreams to bring back a Percheron-type horse for the heavy pulling required. They rode into the yard and Sarah and the children were standing on the porch, dressed in their best. She refused to meet in town when he returned from his travels, wanting privacy to greet and cry.

Charles and William swarmed him when he sat on the stairs and little Sarah and Andy toddled up to him. He took the twins in his arms and gave them each a kiss. Sarah retrieved them when they started crying, smiling inquiringly at Karl.

“This is Karl Wetherby, Sarah. Karl, meet Sarah, William, Charles, little Sarah, Andy and the twins, Ed and Jacob. Kids, this is Karl Wetherby.”

Sarah welcomed him and invited him into the house. William and Charles immediately clamored for his attention, wanting to show him their toys. The huge man was surprised and looked around before he put his feet. To him, there seemed hundreds of kids, all in a position to be stepped on and pulling at his pants or hands.

Zach laughed and picked up Little Sarah and Andy and put them in the playpen. He told William and Charley to leave Karl alone, that he would play with them later. Sarah had changed Ed and Jacob and was in the bedroom feeding them. Zach took two beers from the refrigerator and carefully poured them into glasses.

He explained that the beer had sediment in the bottles, but that the Churchill's were trying to find a way to get CO₂ so they could filter it. Karl took his and reverently tilted it to his lips and lifted the glass until he had drunk it all. He sat back with an almost spiritual air.

“I haven’t had a beer in three or four years,” he said. “I tried some of the wine, but I am a beer man. Why don’t they have it down south?”

“Beer is hard to ship and this is where their operation is. Besides, it’s not pasteurized and it has to be drunk fairly soon. There are a few things we haven’t re-mastered, yet.”

Karl eyed the beer in Zach’s hand, commenting on how fast the beer had to be consumed. Zach laughed and handed him his glass. He went back to the kitchen and poured another.

Sarah came out of the bedroom and gave Zach a kiss. “Welcome home, traveler. Hope you had a good time on your vacation.”

He snorted and, from the look on his face, Sarah knew that the memories were bad. He pulled her down on his lap and gave her the short version of the last few months. She stroked his head as he spoke. Karl suddenly found himself jealous of the two of them.

“Well, I have news, too. Right after you left, a Mormon missionary came through. He visited here with a message from Elder MacDonald of the Dannites. He and Maizey talked for a long time and the upshot is that she and Steve converted and left last week for Deseret.”

Zach shook his head. He would miss them, but Maizey was a judgmental person who disapproved of Zach’s lifestyle and Steve pretty much followed her wishes. “I hope they took their share of the cattle and horses,” he said.

“Oh, yes,” Sarah replied. “They took a young bull and a couple of breeders. Steve didn’t want the stallions, but they did take several teams to draw the wagons.

“Looks like we are going to have to find someone else to help”

“Well, Karl, want to get into the breeding business?” Zach asked, turning to his guest.

“Shouldn’t I get married first?” he returned innocently.

Sarah got up in mock disgust and left to start dinner. “I hope your manners are better than your jokes,” she said as she walked away.

“Seriously, as much as I disliked you down in Texas, that’s changed for my part. If you want to join me here, there is a place across the porch that has turned up empty.

“I’ll give you the same deal that I gave Steve; fifty-fifty. But I have to tell you; the breeding business will make the mines seem like a vacation. When they are ready to foal or calf, we get up and stay up.”

Karl was touched. His whole life had been spent as a tough or fighter. He never had a home of his own. Here was this man, who had known him only a few months, offering him the roots he never had and never would admit to wanting. He simply reached out his hand and shook Zach’s.

“Good,” said Zach. “I didn’t tell you the hardest part.” He snuck an obvious look at William and Charlie, who knew that was a signal for a wrestling match. “You have to fight these little monkeys every day,” he finished as he let them drag him out of his chair to the rug.

Karl was hesitant, but when Zach encouraged William to attack him, he joined in and they all played until Sarah called for them to take it outside and began to beat the whole laughing group gently out the door with a fly swatter.

Chapter 24

Ominous News

Spring 2046

The reavers seem to appear as fast as we eliminate them. Like the heads of the dragon that Greek story was about. From what we found out at Ganado, General March is behind all of them. He is weaving a network of gangs and is drawing the noose tight. Even though he ran Billy's gang (I don't even know his last name) against the Aztecs, I think it was to isolate us from the possibility of allies. If that was his plan, it backfired on him. Where before, we were hostile, we have an armed truce between us. The Aztecs showed that they could fight, if motivated and led properly. The Ganado fight also brought us into contact with the Texans. Too bad they weren't located closer, we could supply them with communication equipment and they could be an early warning site for reaver or Fundamentalist incursions in that area.

So, several good things came out of this: 1. we made a truce with the Aztecs. 2. we have friendly relations with the Texans near Houston. 3. we rescued six hundred people from the Aztecs or reavers. I would like to see if there are further returns of prisoners. 4. we eliminated nearly three hundred and fifty reavers. The more I think of that expedition, however, the luckier I know we were. I have been commenting on the ineptitude of the leaders of the enemy, but we displayed that very incompetence. We split our force too many ways and we were extremely lucky not to end up like Custer. If it wasn't for the confusion about the flares, we would have had our lunch handed to us, I think. I wasn't like Peetz, where we whittled them down to size before launching an attack. We'll have to be more careful, next time. And there will be a next time.

Karl Wetherby is a surprise. I thought I would have to shoot him, also, at the refugee camp. Now he is my partner. The kids like him, too. He got a real chuckle when William told him of my reaction the first time I saw the big draft horses back in Missouri.

I am anxious to hear the Detached Scouts' report. They looked exhausted, yesterday, when we met them. Hopefully, a hot meal, families and some rest will help. K Singh is staying with the O'Malleys until another supply train heads south. I think it's pretty funny that the Sikh is the only one who didn't come home with a bride.

Speaking of brides, the marriage bug seems to bite whenever there are casualties. I guess it's a biological urge to keep the race going. In nine months time, I will bet there are a lot of births. Christ, I hope one of them is not Sarah, though she wouldn't mind, I guess.

The Council Chambers were full for the briefing. Benton called the meeting to order and the minutes were dispensed with. Committee reports, on food production, fuel collection, commissary, military and building were brief. There were excesses in food stores and cloth production and the Council had sent out traders to look for markets. The coal and wood production were ahead of schedule, there were adequate levels of everything, except for medicines, as usual, and school supplies.

Gail O'Malley reported that the school was complete and the students moved in. The old school buildings were being retrofitted to make homes for some of the refugees.

Carl reported that the new barracks were almost completed and plans for a military school, with a curriculum based loosely on West Point and Annapolis models had been presented to the Council. He made a general invitation to the community to attend the investment ceremonies of the complex to be held in a month.

The report on refugees was less brief. Barb Parker, the doctor in charge of the health checkups of the refugees indicated that many of the women refused to say what their jobs had been in the Empire and that, of the seventy-seven children, only five were above the age of six, the rest having been conceived and born during the women's slavery. There were girls who had become mothers at the age of thirteen and had had several children since. Barb had to gather her composure before she reported that several of the women and girls were pregnant and had been when they were liberated. She spread her outrage to the audience and Benton had to gavel for order.

Edna March spoke next. She was concerned with the mental health of the women. She began by stating that most of the women were in good mental health. From stories she had recorded during her sessions, anyone who couldn't stand up to the strain of the life committed suicide or was 'put out of the way' by their masters. "The one significant thread I found," she continued in her soft, soothing voice, "was that most of these women and girls feel a deep guilt about their condition and that is why they do not want to return home. I would recommend intense counseling for any of these women who are contemplating marriage. Not that marriage would be bad for them, but there will be more than the usual stress associated with forming a partnership."

There was a moment of silence while the room absorbed this information. Benton rose, slowly and thanked the two women. He stood awkwardly, as if the thought of proceeding to another topic would relegate the last to insignificance. After a brief pause, however, he called on Carl for the military report.

He rose in place at the table and asked Hans Minkema to report. Hans stood and gave a synopsis of the meeting with the Aztecs, the refugees and the expedition. He gave a list of the casualties and the news that the Texans were organizing and would be a solid ally in the future.

When he sat down, Carl rose again and called on Michael O'Malley to report the findings of the Detached Scouts. Michael was nervous speaking before such a big crowd. He gripped the edge of the podium until his knuckles shown white. His report was also brief. He told of the net being built by General March, using his gangs of reavers and how the Fundamentalists in Missouri were barely holding their own against them. The Fundamentalists had reestablished their settlements in Kansas and had been able to eliminate several small gangs.

These were no large reaver bands or operations west of New Jerusalem without the permission of March. To the east, there were big bands and they had territory assigned to them, from the borders of the Caliphate to Florida. The intent was to create a reaver elite which ruled their territory and sent payment in supplies or slaves to March, who controlled all of the bands. Even though large territories were assigned, the Fundamentalists insurrectionists had kept the actual area controlled by the reavers confined.

General March appeared to be staying in Missouri and not encouraging his bands to molest Kansas. Several times, a band tried to ignore the General, but they had been attacked by a coalition of the rest and the leaders executed and new ones promoted.

Zach thought of the Middle Ages in Europe, with a strong central king and obedient lords. March would keep the lords obedient and stomp out any dissent quickly and ruthlessly.

Mike continued, explaining that the General still feared and hated Jefferson and, after the Fundamentalists were subjugated, he would turn on them. The Detached Scouts had decided to return to Jefferson after the news of the destruction of the Lake Texana reavers. March had been

sure that spies had caused the destruction of one of his biggest bands and had ordered the arrest of many of the small, independent reaver bands.

Michael was sweating profusely by the time he finished and was relieved when he was able to sit down. Carl nodded his approval at the report. Zach knew that he was going to be the next ranger troop leader after his success on this mission if he did not have a heart attack when speaking in public.

The last report was on the new settlement at Trinidad and the apparent success of the venture. The majority of settlers were from the Aztec Empire and they had built a new town and were building farms and ranches on the plains. Some of the newcomers planned to move into the mountains near the lake and refurbish the resorts and establish fishing villages.

When Benton called for new business, James Cutler stood and commented on the Mormon missionaries. "I don't have any problem with them," he said. "But Father Tilford was saying that we are forbidden to send any of our people there. Is that fair?"

When he sat down, there were murmurs of agreement in the crowd. This was an issue that was simmering on the back burner. Benton indicated that they were looking into the situation. After talking with the religious members of the community, he found that any proselytizing would be done on an individual basis, but that the priests and ministers felt that there should be free access allowed to both sides.

The meeting broke up and Zach and Karl headed for the old War Room. The facility was to be moved to the new military campus the next day. The troop leaders and advisors who had gathered greeted them. No meeting had been called, but the place was treated as a club.

He got a beer from the cooler and was taken aside by Hans. H looked nervous and Zach, who had seen this same nervousness many other times, was amused, though he didn't show it. He let Hans hem and haw and they finally got to the point.

He and Harry had been thinking about Coralee Morris, Janet Smith and Tammy Miles during the expedition and discussed the situation. They decided that they would ask the girls to marry them or they would have to search elsewhere for wives. Both men felt that it was time to settle down and raise a family. When he confronted them, the women had huddled for several minutes and stated that they were agreeable. Coralee said she would not be part of a 'harem' and indicated Harry was her choice. Janet and Tammy didn't mind sharing the household chores and childrearing and Hans, who had no problem with bigamy, agreed to marry both of them. They would wait for Harry to return from training the Texans.

The men insisted that Zach preside at the ceremony, but Tammy and Coralee wanted a church wedding. They were at an impasse over this.

Zach and Hans went over to see Father Tillford at the parish house next to the church. Mrs. O'Malley, his housekeeper this week, opened the door at their knock. She ushered them into the office where the priest was formulating his sermon. When they explained the situation, the young priest looked amused.

"I don't see a problem," he said. "Why don't I just play second fiddle? Zach, here, can perform the marriage ceremony and I can bless the rings and the couples. That way, you gentlemen would get your wishes and the ladies would get theirs."

They all laughed at the simplicity of the solution. Wondering why they hadn't thought of it themselves, they thanked the priest and went back to the War Room to celebrate the betrothals.

That night, Sarah said with sparkling eyes, “It took them long enough. The girls and I have had this planned for months. They even picked their men. I am surprised that the male race ever survived, as dense as it is.”

“Dense, huh?” Zach said, reaching for her. “I’ll show you how dense I am.” Their next child was conceived that night.

Sara broached the subject of adopting one of the older refugee orphans to help her look after the children. Zach explained about the psychological problems with the pregnant girls. Sarah expressed concern for the girls, said she was talking about a nanny, not another mother. “We need someone to watch after our kids, not one of her own.”

Later that week, when they were in town, they spoke with Dr. Parker and Edna March. The two recommended Kay Maldonado and after interviewing the quiet, blond girl, they registered the adoption at the Town Hall. They collected her few belongings and drove her back to the ranch. She was shy with the children at first, but quickly warmed to them. By the time they reached the ranch, they were the best of friends.

Zach brought another bed with them and they set it up in the nursery. Looking around the crowded room, Zach was determined to add several rooms to the overcrowded house. Now that the major building projects were nearly completed, he drew on vouchers from the Commissary for carpenters, masons and plumbers.

They began work immediately. The building went quickly, with Zach helping when he could. Though he wasn’t handy with tools, he toted and did scut work. Karl had a surprising knack with detail work and he proceeded to craft chairs, desks, dressers, bookshelves, bedsteads, toy boxes and the thousand and one other things that went into a child’s room. They added four bedrooms, a playroom, teaching area and enlarged the living room, adding another fireplace.

The addition was two stories and was designed with the bedrooms opening off the central playroom. There were three bathrooms and storage was added to the large attic. The result was an eight bedroom, five-bath home.

“My place looks like the shack of a poor relation,” Karl observed, when the addition was finished. “Looks like I will have to fix it up so you won’t be ashamed to visit.”

The refugee committee set up an adoption bureau and the number of orphans quickly dropped. Benton was worried that a Child Protective Service would have to be established, but Barb Parker kept in touch with the other physicians to verify that there were no problems. Zach felt that, with the small communities, any abuse would be readily apparent and any culprits punished harshly.

The summer months went quickly. Harry returned and the nuptials were concluded that week. The celebration was especially boisterous for the two once-confirmed bachelors.

The new settlement at Trinidad thrived. Soon, fresh fish was available and the resorts along the shore were refurbished and vacation rentals for the summer and winter sports were booked to capacity. The scavengers were encouraged to bring in sports equipment for fishing, boating, snow-skiing and –boarding. Several of the refugee women had been maids, cooks, waitresses and entertainers and took over running of the resorts.

The crops were coming in full to bursting. The horse, cattle, sheep and llama herds thrived. The mills were putting out more lumber than could be used. The mines, both the old and the new, were producing coal, silver, lead and gold enough to fulfill the needs of all the communities.

The trade with El Paso started off hesitantly, but soon grew. Lumber, fruits and vegetables, cattle and sheep, cloth and lumber were the major exports. Coffee, tea, spices,

pottery and small carvings were the imports. The Aztecs from El Paso were grateful for the trade, the arable land was small and it was expensive to bring supplies over the deserts. The fruits and vegetables, however, were often spoiled from the heat. John Sinclair's team was working to get two refrigerator trucks converted to the new power supply.

They occasionally heard from the Fundamentalists. There was still trouble with the reavers, mostly skirmishes, but nothing major. Raphael was of the opinion that there was still infighting between the bands and General March did not have complete control of his 'vassals' and the gangs were busy with their 'subjects'. Any surplus weapons Jefferson could part with were sent to Raphael for distribution to areas under reaver control where a fifth column effort was active.

Small, independent gangs were hunted down, but there were fewer and fewer of them. The Texans reported that another gang had attempted to set up near the lake, but they had been routed and had not returned.

The war between the New Africans and the Mahdists had degenerated to desultory skirmishing. Both sides appeared to be exhausted. The New Africans had the effrontery to ask for more aid.

A large number of pregnancies had been reported, including that of Sarah, though the doctor assured Zach there were no twins in the offing. With the refugees and the sudden explosion of pregnancies, the population balance of Jefferson was tilting towards more young and women that had to be protected and, though they contributed to the wellbeing of the community, the number of troopers was slowly being drained by losses.

The topic came up at the next meeting in the War Room. The site of the meeting was in the new facility and was attended, not only to discuss the military situation, but also to christen

the building. It was a week after Harry and Hans got married, so there was good-natured banter that quickly settled down as Carl called for order.

He announced that the first defense classes had been started with Karl Wetherby as instructor. Karl gave a rundown on the training for each age group and the expectations he had. It was motioned and seconded that all of the rangers had to take and pass the classes to remain in their current units.

Jerry Carter raised the manpower question, up from Trinidad for the ceremonies. “With the number of communities we have, eleven is it?” he began, looking at the roster posted on the wall. “It looks like we are getting spread a little thin. We haven’t replaced our losses, with the opening up of Trinidad and the two troops there.” He wandered over to the map of the Rockies. “We are spread from Wyoming to Texas. One of these days General March is going to come for us and we are scattered out all over the map.

“From the reports from the rangers, there are some twenty gangs with two hundred to three hundred members. That’s four thousand men. Sure, they can’t commit them all, but, if they conscript the locals, we would face some three thousand. They could strike anywhere along the range and we don’t have enough to do anything about it except hunker down and pray.

“Even if we hold them off in one area, there is little we can do to counter attack. They can just back off and hit us someplace else, weakening us with a lot of little engagements. March doesn’t care how many reavers are killed, as long as we get hurt.”

Harry chimed in, “And, if he joins with the Mahdists, how many are we going to face and in how many locations?”

Zach, exasperated, asked them how they were going to get more troopers. Jimmy Pinder suggested abandoning some settlements, but they all knew that that would spell the beginning of the end. Their need for resources dictated that the settlements stay.

“We could enlist the aid of the Fundies,” Matt Busby commented, but the argument that the reavers wouldn’t attack Jefferson until they had gone through the Fundies silenced that line of thought.

“Since we signed the treaty with the Aztecs, the Bear Falggers have been cool towards us,” observed Carl. “I don’t think there will be much help from them. The rest of the states haven’t got the manpower to be of much help, even if they could get here in time. Even with the radios, by the time they got here we would have lost, won or starved to death. The Mormons would help, I think, except they are a little miffed about our wanting to be able to send missionaries to Deseret. The only real allies we have are the Sioux and, again, there aren’t enough of them to make up the numbers we need.”

Stretch Linder, up from Cave Valley, tipped his chair dangerously on its back legs and, while working on a carving of a toy gun for his son, Kevin, drawled, “Well, now that we know what we can’t do and how bad it would be, let’s consider what we can do, hows-about? We got one of the best trained groups for miles around.” His chair hit the floor with a thump. He sidled over to the same map Hans had looked at. He pointed his knife to Black Valley, Beaver Valley, Cave Valley, Black Valley and Big Valley.

“There’s troops there. Most are really militia, but some are what we would call regular troopers, unmarried and young. We could shift those to the other troops in the danger zone.” He pointed to Mitchell, Gold Cove, Rio Grande, Eagle, Gunnison, Trinidad and Palo Duro.

“That would give us half a troop or so, not much, but something.”

Zach interjected, “We would be like a shield ring or one of the old British squares. They break through and we are dead meat.”

“Well, I don’t think it would be that bad, Zach. Unlike those formations, we’ve got hills and valleys to get through,” argued Stretch.

Carl took back the meeting and said, “The only long term solution is to recruit more fighters, as I see it. We can’t give growth hormones to the kids and we can’t concentrate our forces, other than follow Stretch’s suggestion.

“I’m willing to bet that the Aztecs will be sending us the same mix of returnees, if they send any more at all, that we got before, so there’s not much help there. We would have to set up another settlement to absorb them and we’d be in the same boat as now.”

Mark Pecchia raised his hand to get Carl’s attention and was recognized. “We found out during the Texas campaign that there are a lot of small ranches and farms and towns hidden all over. We have pretty much ignored them, because they looked like they were just getting by and we didn’t want to chance getting shot, just to say hello. What if we started approaching these places deliberately and trying to recruit them? They would have to be pretty tough or lucky to have survived this long.”

They discussed Mark’s suggestion and agreed that it had merit. Karl proposed that they send out one of the ranger troops and test it out. Samuel Ling offered to take his First Rangers out. It was accepted and he was ordered to set out immediately. They discussed methods of contact, what they offered and what help they could provide getting them to Jefferson.

Zach suggested that they send a message to Raphael offering him and his people refuge, if they were pressed. They knew how touchy Raphael was about accepting help, but they agreed to extend the offer. They would forward this suggestion to the Council for action.

The last order of business was the appeal by the New Africans for aid that had been passed down by the Council. There was general agreement that there would be no troopers sent and any volunteers should consider their move as permanent. Kim Allen suggested that they trade some of the mismatched guns and ammunition for prisoners, to avoid more slaughters like the one the previous year. With the large store of weapons from the Cavanaugh Cache, there were a lot of excess guns of unique calibers, with some ammunition for each weapon. The War Council accepted Kim's idea and forwarded that offer to the Council, as well.

The meeting broke up and the plans for the next day's celebrations and opening ceremony for the new barracks were discussed at the bar.

Chapter 25

Reaver Attack

Spring 2046

As much as I'm worried about how exposed Trinidad is, I'm glad we have another settlement down that way. Gunnison can offer some protection if there is an attack and the Cherokees should be a good early warning system. They can also escape to the lake district and there is a good series of fortifications built by the engineers.

It is really too bad about the Aztec refugees being treated the way they were. A lot of the hotheads were for going to war over it, but nothing would have been solved. Fortunately, Sarah and her Merry Band of Matchmakers are working hard to get them paired up with husbands. No wonder I never stood a chance!

Crops look good and the herds have come through with few problems and a large increase. It looks like we are going to have to open new markets. Speaking of which, the New Africans have raised the 'price' of refugees. It seems like we are sending up a good sized herd every month. Not that I am complaining about it, but it galls me that we have to bribe them not to kill those poor souls. We are even rescuing Muslims and returning them to the Caliphate.

The next day, the troopers at the hotel collected their gear and assembled in the quad, as the parade ground was termed. The rest of the town assembled on makeshift bleachers or they brought blanket to sit on. Benton Robison ordered the flags raised on the new flagpole and the national anthem played. Various dignitaries made speeches, tours were organized and lunch was served.

The rest of the day was spent getting settled and organizing the barracks. To avoid arguments, the bunks had been assigned by blind draw, though there was a brisk trading of spots. Unit trophies were hung and the pennants of the troops present mounted beside the doors.

While the camp was being organized, a rider came galloping in. He dismounted amidst a cloud of dust and ran into the War Room. Seeing him, there was a rush for the building.

The trooper was from One Troop, on patrol to the east. They had been on a scouting and trading mission to Raphael's settlement. Carl grabbed his arm and demanded to know what had happened.

The news was startling; the Fundamentalist Council had its opening session. Not only were the representatives from many of the areas present, but the president, Pastor Simmons, and the Fifteen Judges were also there. A massive explosion resulted in the destruction of the Council Chambers and the deaths of hundreds, including the Council representatives, Pastor Simmons and the Judges. Immediately after, there was a massive reaver attack. Thousands in the city of New Jerusalem had been slaughtered. Michael and most of the troops had been overrun. The city had been looted and hundreds of captives had been marched away towards St. Louis. Refugees had reached Raphael the day One Troop was scheduled to leave. Matt had sent Tommy Sanderson, the trooper, to report. The rest of the troop was in the field protecting refugees and fighting bands of marauding reavers.

Carl ordered assembly sounded and the gun trucks loaded with supplies, weapons and ammunition. Orders were radioed to Big Valley to send Nine Troop to Mitchell and to Gunnison, Rio Grande and Trinidad to send Eight (Rio Grande), Fourteen (Rio Grande), Eighteen (Gunnison), Twenty (Gunnison), Twenty-one (Trinidad) Troops and Eighth Rangers (Rio Grande) to meet at the Crossroads.

A flurry of activity followed and Two and Ten Troops, Second and Fourth Rangers were mounted and away within two hours. They rode hard, with the rangers forming a screen to the east, south to the rendezvous with the rest of the troops. They met two days later and, after exchanging mounts, rode east towards the Raphael's settlement. Along the way they had two sharp engagements with reaver bands, suffering several wounded, but nothing serious. The first engagement consisted of an ambush set up by the rangers, with mop up by the troopers. They killed seventeen reavers, captured eleven more. The survivors of the band retreated to the northeast.

The second fight saw a reaver band lying in ambush for the column. The scouts spotted it and the tables were turned. The reaver horses were stampeded and the gang was picked off by the snipers. The few survivors, like the eleven captured earlier, were hung. Jimmy Pinder wondered aloud about this.

"You'd think that they would know by now that we were going to hang them."

"The one's we hang can't tell them," returned Karl, dryly.

They rode up on a Fundamentalist patrol and barely averted an exchange of shots and the patrol led them into town. They met Raphael giving orders to several patrol leaders. He turned at the sound of horses and greeted Zach with relief.

"I'm glad to see you," was his heartfelt greeting. He was worn and drawn and his usually clean shaven face sprouted stubble. There was a fresh bandage around his left hand.

"Come inside," he gestured as his two troop leaders rode off. In the store, converted to a war room, they found several men talking on radios and scribbling on pads of paper. Runners were hurrying into other rooms. They returned to the radio operators with new messages that were sent out.

Raphael led Zach, Karl, Jimmy, Ihro Masamoto, Harry McGregor, John Grenier, Jerry Carter, Don Massoglia, Edward Soletto and Ed Black to a large conference room where the storeroom had been. He invited them to seats and collapsed wearily into a chair.

“Your General March couldn’t or wouldn’t hold off, Zach,” he said. “There is no government. Wiped out completely. Representative, Judges, even that miserable Simmons. All gone.”

“Are you trying to tell us that this was March?” asked Zach incredulously.

“Who else? The bomb went off during the opening of the assembly. Everyone with any power was there. Immediately after the explosion, the capitol was attacked from all sides. Those that weren’t slaughtered were taken prisoner. The way I figure it is when the piecemeal takeover by the reavers didn’t work, he bet it all on one throw.

“God knows that the reaver gangs were taking over big chunks of New Jerusalem, though Michael and his men were doing them some damage and slowing them down. Since the bombing, there has been little resistance. The people are too stunned.”

Karl moved to the maps on the wall. The old South was shown with pins representing towns held by reaver and Fundamentalist forces. Most of Missouri, large parts of western Kentucky and Tennessee were marked for the reavers.

As he was standing there, a runner came in, consulted the paper in his hand and used a red pin to mark Fayetteville, Arkansas as reaver. He gave the group around the table an incurious glance and left the room.

“I can’t believe March would take a chance like this,” observed Harry. “He runs the risk of you guys stopping him and of us stepping in and doing the same.

Karl took a last glance at the board and turned. "I'm guessing that March is having a hard time controlling the various bands and, rather than try, he gambled. It's not a bad gamble at any rate. He is almost assured that the Fundamentalists are going to be in disarray. All the leaders killed or captured. The capitol city in ruins.

"If you could stand up to him, you would be in no position to hit back. You would have to reorganize your government, your military. New Jerusalem might splinter with infighting. We are too far away and notice that there are no red pins to the west of the Missouri border. He might not be sticking to the east side of the Mississippi, but he is still the Fundamentalists problem. He hasn't even remotely threatened Jefferson. An expedition from the Rockies would be expensive and, possibly, weaken us to the point our butts are hanging in the wind."

They all saw that Karl was right. The sparsely settled Kansas was free from reaver incursions, except for raids. Meanwhile, there were a lot of refugees flooding into the area from the east.

Reports came in that the freed 'inferior races' had gone on a rampage. They had started a slaughter that didn't differentiate between reavers and Fundamentalists. The situation was chaotic, to say the least and getting more so by the minute.

Over the next few hours a plan was worked out to patrol the eastern border areas with Missouri and Arkansas. A message was sent to the Texans to warn them about the reaver attacks and for them to watch their eastern border with Louisiana. Eighteen Troop and Eighth Rangers were sent on a patrol to the Tulsa area to determine if there were reaver incursions there.

Ten and Twenty Troops and Second Rangers were assigned to patrol the eastern Kansas border, relieved by Fourteen and Twenty-one Troops and First Rangers. Two Troop was on

permanent patrol around the settlements. The Fundamentalists were assigned as guides and support for the patrols. Several units were being organized from the refugees.

Zach sent word back to Gunnison to organize emergency supplies for the refugees and to maintain a high state of alert. Things were beginning to settle down and the state of panic had subsided.

A trooper from Ten Troop arrived from Evan Parker and reported that there was a large group of black refugees surrounding a smaller group of white refugees. Ten Troop had intervened, but the situation was still volatile.

Zach, Karl, Raphael, one of the new Fundamentalist units and Two Troop followed Paul Freeman to the site of the confrontation. Evan was relieved that reinforcements had arrived. His troopers had herded the two groups into shallow gullies and were keeping an eye on them.

Zach had the leaders of the black refugees brought and was surprised that they consisted of a tall elderly woman and a scholarly looking young man with a straggly goatee. He invited them to sit in camp chairs. They introduced themselves as Katherine West and Jeremy Peoples.

Zach looked at the ebony colored face of the woman and said, "You wrote the Savage Chronicles, didn't you?"

She smiled and replied, "Yes, a long time ago. Those were better days than these. Thank you for remembering."

"Well. What is going on here?"

The young man had a surprisingly robust voice. His baritone carried and he was, obviously a trained orator. "We were escaping from the oppression of New Jerusalem when we saw the others. As we were discussing whether to attack or not, your men came up, isolated us and, apparently, called you to adjudicate the matter."

“Yeah, consider this adjudicating. Look, there’s enough slaughter going on without adding to it. Where are you heading, anyway?”

The two looked at each other. Katherine smiled a small smile and, with a twinkle in her eye, said, “We are looking for you, of course. Oh, not you, specifically, but someone from Jefferson. We want to join our brothers and sisters in New Africa. We understand that you can help us get there.”

Zach pushed his hat back on his head. “Yes, we can help you get there. It’s a long way, but we can get you there, with the help of the Sioux. How many are in your party?”

“There are thirty-six with us, but we know of other groups that are trying to do the same thing. We have found, however, when we travel in large groups that food is harder to find and we become a target for Simmons’ men or the outlaws,” said Jeremy.

“In case you haven’t heard,” said Raphael. “Pastor Simmons is dead and New Jerusalem has collapsed. The reavers are picking up the pieces. I am trying to provide a place for the survivors to build something new.

“I, and my people, did not endorse the plan for forced labor. That is the reason that we are here. Without Michael’s intervention, I imagine that I would be in the ground. I was stripped of my Judgeship and banished when I opposed Simmons’ policy. So, please, don’t include me in his company.”

Zach was surprised at the news. He had always figured that labor camps were not feasible on the western border of New Jerusalem. He interjected, “The situation here and now is how not to turn this into a bloodbath. Mrs. West, the people of Jefferson will be happy to help your people get to New Africa or include them with us. We will do this if your people do not initiate trouble. There will be supplies, guides and transportation for those who need it.”

“Call me Kate, please,” she replied. “For this group, I can safely answer that we would be extremely appreciative for the help. For other groups, I am not their spokeswoman. We have been oppressed for many years and there is a great deal of pent up anger.”

“Understandable,” said Zach. “Is there some way of contacting these other groups? We will have to treat them as reavers, if there is bloodshed. I would like to avoid that, but I won’t have much choice if we are attacked or those under our protection are attacked, you understand.”

Jeremy sighed and agreed. He went to speak with the rest of his party and Zach chatted with Katherine West about her book. They had agreed to disagree on several points when Jeremy returned.

“I got all of them to agree to refrain from initiating violence in exchange for aide in reaching New Africa. Several of them agreed to search out other refugees and try to convince them of the wisdom of following our path.

“As soon as we can agree on an assembly point, they will leave on this errand. The only stipulation is that you will send along a representative from Jefferson to reinforce this offer.”

“Hm, I will be putting a man in a dangerous position, but you’ll be putting in your people in the same position here,” said Zach. He asked a trooper to ask George Washington to join them.

Raphael had his men take the white refugees to back to Seldon and settle them in. He also ordered them to send back a wagon with supplies for the black refugees for which Kate and Jeremy thanked him. The atmosphere had thawed, but there was still coolness between the Fundamentalists and the black refugees.

The ensuing silence was broken with the arrival of a young black man. He was introduced as George Washington and he nodded, shy in the present company. Zach explained

the situation and asked if he would like to volunteer to act as liaison. He grinned and commented that Karl had warned him about volunteering, which brought a flush to Karl's face. He agreed, though, to join the men that Jeremy called over.

George was in charge of the running of the expedition, but John Castro, a tall man of thirty, was in charge of negotiations. They agreed to set the rendezvous at Wilson Lake Park on the east side of Wilson Lake. Food and supplies would be organized and one of the Jefferson Troops would be stationed there. John asked about weapons and was told that they didn't have any to spare, to which he replied that they would get some on their own.

Two Troop was assigned to escort the refugees to Wilson Lake and prepare for any others, but that Jeremy and Katherine were in charge of the day-to-day operations. Karl, Jason Costler and his men were to be in charge of security. They were to take a radio with them and report regularly.

Ten Troop returned to its patrol further east and Two Troop were ordered to wait for the supplies and set out for the lake. The rest of the party returned to Seldon. Once there, Zach sent a message to Gunnison relaying all that had happened and asking for more supplies to Wilson Lake.

After agreeing, the radio operator relayed the news that there were sixteen new families at Palo Duro that Samuel Ling had recruited. There were also twenty-seven prisoners released by the Aztecs. Zach thanked them and signed off, buoyed by this news.

There were no more brushes with the reavers and the stream of refugees, both black and white, slowed to a trickle. Raphael was busy organizing those that were resettling in his area. New settlements at Alma and Norton were established. He organized his troops after the Jefferson model, mobile concentrations of troops able to react quickly to a crisis.

Zach sent Fourteen, Eighteen and Twenty-one Troops back as the Fundamentalists troops were formed and trained. At the end of the month, Raphael mounted an expedition against the reavers. It was a mild success, resulting in the destruction of a band of reavers in the Wichita area. Fifty reavers were killed and the survivors chased back to Arkansas or hung.

The situation had stabilized to the point that Zach, who had been away for three months, was readying the last of the troops to return. On their last patrol, Second Rangers brought in five men. They said they were refugees from around St. Louis who made their way to Kansas. While Raphael was questioning them, Jesus Santiago, who had been with the detached scouts, took Zach aside. He had recognized one of the men, names Jake Hanson, as being high in General March's councils.

The other four men who had come in with Hanson were being fed in the diner. Zach had Jesus collect a squad and take them quietly into custody while he went into the room where their leader was being questioned.

He sat down and listened for a few minutes, waiting for a pause. When there was a lull in the conversation, he interjected, "Well, Jake. How are things with the reavers?"

The man started. He replied, "Names John Johnson, not Jake." He hadn't turned around and his body was tense. Raphael looked confused and wary. He shot a look at Zach.

"John has been telling us how disorganized the reavers are. There seems to be a lot of infighting. Several of the gangs have challenged General March and they are chewing each other up. He says that this would be a good time to counterattack."

Zach had freed his Webley and was holding it loosely behind Hank's back. "That right, Jake? You think that Raphael here should take his men and attack? Where do you think this attack should be?"

“I told you. My name isn’t Jake,” he said, his voice rising with stress. The back of his shirt was darkening with nervous sweat. He still didn’t turn around to face Zach. “The best place to catch the General is around New Jerusalem. I heard he was going there to see about setting up his capitol there. He isn’t supposed to have many men with him.”

“I think you are lying, Jake,” said Zach quietly.

This time Jake spun around, but the retort died on his lips as he saw the gun pointed at him. “What is this?” he demanded.

“Jake, you were recognized. I have it on good authority that you and the General are tight. Did he send you here to lure Raphael out? Were you going to set up an ambush at New Jerusalem? Were you hoping that we would be there, too? Bag us all at once?”

Raphael slid his chair out of the line of fire and asked, “You sure about this, Zach?”

“Definite,” was the answer.

Jake wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He kept staring at the pistol. As he was about to speak, there was a volley of shots from across the street. His head jerked up and he turned pale.

“All right, wait,” he said. “Yeah, we were with March, but we left him. He’s crazy. Killer crazy. We changed our names. You got no right to do this.”

Zach cocked his gun and gave the frightened man a sad smile. “Not anywhere good enough, Jake. Another lie and I will shoot you where you are.”

Jake lunged from his chair, but he was twisted and it took him precious time. Zach shot him, shattering a knee. He fell to the floor in agony and clutched himself, rolling back and forth in pain.

Zach cocked his gun again.

"I'm dying here," wailed Jake.

"Not yet," answered an unsympathetic Zach. "Soon, though, if you don't start with the truth."

"Man, don't shoot. You're right. We were supposed to get the Fundamentalists out of Selden. The General wants to wipe this place out. We thought that you other guys had left. The General was gonna do this piecemeal. Get me some help."

"Where was the attack supposed to be?" asked Raphael.

"By Kansas City. There are some hills there. We were supposed to lead you into the trap. Oh, God, I need a doctor."

Zach disarmed the writhing man and turned his weapons over to Raphael. He suggested that the men be hung and sent back to the General. Raphael would have liked to turn the ambush around, but he had been through the country and there was little cover from the west.

The four men, one had died during his arrest, were hung and a troop of Fundamentalists took the bodies near to where the ambush was to take place and chivvied them eastward. They waited until a group of riders had intercepted them and returned to Selden.

Zach and his men made their way to Walker Lake and found a small village of several hundred tents and lean-tos housing the black refugees. He had sent word that his men would be arriving to escort them on the road north on the first leg of their journey to New Africa. He met with the leaders of the refugees and asked them to have their people prepared to move in three days. Jefferson had sent several dozen wagons for transport, now that there was an assembly line converting vehicles to the new power source, and a herd of a hundred horses, some sheep, cattle and goats.

Katherine West, Jeremy Peoples and a tall, stern looking man named Joshua Milk had been chosen as the leaders of the camp. They agreed that the caravan would be ready to move. They had organized a couple of troops, based on the Jefferson model and trained by Karl, Jimmy and the troop leaders. Their weapons had come from the reavers they had defeated.

A small troop of rangers, call the Senegalese, would be staying at the lake camp, waiting for other refugees, though the stream had slowed to a trickle. George Washington had agreed to stay with them a month and lead the next band to the meeting place with the Sioux. Raphael would help them with supplies and transport.

During the ride north, Zach and Katherine cemented the bond between the two groups. They talked of the political situation in New Africa, the war with the Mahdists, the reavers and the future relations between their peoples. Zach proposed that they both send representatives to a meeting, once the newcomers had settled in.

By the time they separated, they were both convinced that the relationship between New Africa and Jefferson was on a firmer footing, the only question being how much she could influence the current regime. Katherine agreed that every attempt would be made to send unwanted refugees to Jefferson in exchange for what amounted to a ransom of cattle, horses, sheep and goods. Zach was not happy about this angle, but realized that it would be a small price to pay to save the lives of those people.

They parted on a sunny afternoon and he led the escort back to Mitchell. Twenty Troop and Eighth Rangers broke off for home and as they entered the Pasture, the troopers were dismissed to the barracks. Family members and the Council were there to greet them. As usual, Sarah had stayed home with the children to await him when they could have him to themselves.

Zach felt the same elation when he topped the rise and saw the ranch. Karl noted that his cabin had been nearly tripled in size. He jokingly asked Zach if Sarah had found him a bride while they were gone. They rode down the road speculating on the change, but Zach's mind dropped the subject when his pregnant wife exited their house with the children in tow. As they dismounted, a man appeared around the foaling barn and a woman came out of the new addition.

Zach greeted his family in a swirl of children, lifting each one and swinging them around. He kissed his wife and held her tightly. She finally pushed back from him and introduced the other couple as Eduardo and Anne Montoya. They were both grooms and she had taken them on to help with the ranch. With mock asperity, she pointed out that Zach and Karl were untrustworthy as employees.

That night, after a long shower and time with the children, they sat down and Karl and Zach related the tale of the last few months. They were sitting on the wide porch between the houses in the mild spring evening. The adults discussed the ramifications of the reavers shattering of the Fundamentalists. Kay had taken the children to bed and the downstairs had quieted down with them gone.

"Depending on how long it takes to pacify the region, we may have a long interlude until they are strong enough to turn to us," Karl said.

"Yes, but once they have pacified the area, there won't be any need to watch their backs," returned Sarah.

"Whatever they do, we will have some warning," interjected Zach. "They will have to go through Raphael. He has set up several more communities with refugees from the reavers. There are about twelve hundred of them, with five hundred fighters. The last report, he is getting

more each day. The longer the reavers take, the more opposition they will have. He is also running guns, supplies and raiders in to cause problems.

“The reavers are finding it more difficult to hold than to take. When they send out small patrols, they are ambushed. Larger patrols move slower and give a lot more warning. Like serfs and peasants from the beginning of time, they are adept at hiding the supplies that the reavers need. They are finding out that the Fundamentalists had cleaned out the stocks in the cities and towns long ago.

“March is starting to organize a feudal form of government. He has set himself up as king, though he doesn’t call himself that, yet. He has apportioned out land to the reaver bands and claims supplies, livestock or slaves to sell to the Mahdists. He can get it now because the reaver bands are weaker than his and he can claim a certain amount of loyalty because of his leadership. Later, he will have jealousy, envy and a desire for power working on his ‘lords’. Those will be the reason to watch his back if he goes after us.”

Eduardo and Anne had been shy about inserting themselves into the conversation, had been listening with rapt attention. Eduardo finally asked, “What about the Mahdists and the Aztecs? Won’t they form alliances against us with the reavers?”

“Possibly,” answered Karl. “However, the Mahdists can’t turn their backs on the New Africans without getting a bayonet in the butt, if you’ll pardon the expression. As for the Aztecs, there is something mighty strange in their agreeing to give up territory and return those slaves. I’m wondering if they may not have their own fish to fry. I suspect that they have their own troubles to the south.”

“Whatever comes, I am ready to hit the sack,” said Zach, rising from his chair. He took Sarah’s hand and said good night to the others

The next morning the whole family loaded onto the wagon and headed for town. Sarah wanted to do some shopping and meet in the town park with other mothers and their children to visit while the children played. Zach, Eduardo and Karl were to report to the full Council.

The Council met at noon and there was a packed house. Zach detailed the operation and its aftermath. When prompted by Gail O'Malley, he gave his opinion on the ramifications of the reavers, which was a rehash of the discussion of the previous evening.

Carl reported on information that had come into the War Room. There were rumors that the Aztecs had problems. Several of the returned slaves had reported that there were troop movements south and the northern posts were down to skeleton units. Karl and Zach looked at each other and nodded. Carl also said that the Aztecs had asked for a cease fire with the Bear Flag Republic and offered to make a wide swath of territory into a no-man's land.

The Texans had reported that some of the settlements and posts on the eastern end of the Rio Grande had been abandoned. They had been in contact with the Israelis who indicated that there were ships from the south harrying the Yucatan Peninsula. Clearly, there was something going on and the Aztecs were barely holding their own.

They walked with Carl to the barracks and drank coffee until it was time to pick up Sarah, the children and purchases. Anne had dinner ready.

Eduardo and Anne proved to be good workers with a love and knowledge of horses. They had both been grooms on large ranches before they had been repatriated. They met on the march to Palo Duro and had been married as soon as they reached Mitchell and had the banns read. They had answered the employment ad that Sarah had posted on the jobs board in City Hall and she had hired them. Sarah had the porch and Karl's house enlarged while her husband was gone.

Zach was pleased with their performance with the horses and cattle and offered them a partnership in the ranch. The couple had happily accepted the offer. Anne's sunny disposition and love of life made her a favorite with the children. Eduardo was somber and hard-working. Though he rarely laughed, he had a dry sense of humor that snuck up on one. All-in-all, all parties were happy with the arrangement.

Karl got along with them and they formed a tightly knit team. The foaling went smoothly and the herds prospered. There was no call for Zach or Karl to be away from the ranch. The few incidents were minor. Several small bands of reavers had been eliminated and a Mahdists patrol had ambushed a troop on patrol. The ambush was ill-timed and the troop escaped with minor casualties.

Raphael sent news that the reavers had been thrown out of their toehold in Arkansas. He called his community Kansas and said that the Fundamentalist confederation had collapsed. There were communities in Arkansas that were forming their own resistance to the reaver gangs.

Word had been received from Katherine West that they had reached New Africa and had settled in. The war had wound down to an armed truce. Both sides had bled themselves white and were like evenly matched boxers taking a respite while they gathered their strength for the next round. She had rescued twenty-three people and sent them to Mitchell. They were from areas to the east of the Great Lakes that the Mahdists had been absorbing. The New African government demanded that each be traded for a head of cattle or two sheep and the price had been paid.

The rest of the spring was spent in work and playing with the children. Zach spent most of his time at home and Sarah was happy with her family around her. Karl was seeing a woman in town and she had spent some time with Sarah, who was still the consummate matchmaker.

Chapter 26

Storms all Around

Spring/Summer 2046

The whole mess is coming to a head. I didn't realize how complacent we had become. We knew our enemies before and there was a sense of permanence. The Mahdists and the New Africans fighting, the Fundamentalists and the Mahdists fighting, the Aztecs and the West Coast fighting and we being pretty much left alone. I was satisfied with the status quo, myself.

Then the Aztecs facing a new threat from the south. The New Africans and Mahdists taking a breather, the Fundamentalists confederacy shattered by March. Don't get me wrong, I like the idea that the Aztecs have turned their attention somewhere else and that the New Africans and the Mahdists have bled each other dry. I'm not even sorry that the Fundamentalist Confederacy has ceased to exist and the slaves (that's what they were, no matter how they were described) freed.

On the flip side, there are the reavers. They used to be a nuisance only, now they are an organized force which we will have to face sometime. It may be years, but the time will come. I can't see Raphael and the other groups holding them off, once the reavers get their territory in hand. With the Mahdists relieved of worry about the Fundamentalists, they will have more resources to use against the New Africans and even with the refugees they may not have the wherewithal to hold them off. The only thing I would like to see continue is their 'trading' captives for supplies.

With the Aztecs being kept busy to the south, the Bear Flaggers will be able to take back more of their land. The Aztecs have weakened their northern forces to the point they are

ineffectual. I am surprised that they are still sending captives to us, though they may be trying to keep us neutral and, as long as the captives keep on coming, we will be.

The situation at home is great. Sarah is looking forward to the birth of our next child, as am I. The new couple is working out better than I could have hoped. They are both expert with the horses and are coming along with the cattle. Anne has had some experience with treatment of ailments and injuries and has stitched up a couple of gashes my prize stallion got from some old wire. Karl is secretly courting a woman, though the secret seems to be one of the worst kept ones in history.

The herds and crops are coming in fine and we will have enough for trading purposes. The weaving sheds are going great guns and there is a lot of demand for the cloth. Wine and beer and whiskey are no problem, other than an occasional overindulgence or two. We have an adequate supply of materials to reload the expended shells and can have more live fire exercises. We have a large brick making operation going, too.

The troops have incorporated the newcomers and Karl has intensified the hand to hand combat training, along with the other Carl, when he has time from the paperwork.

There are the usual marriages and births.

The cycle of life continued. There were few problems and the crops were coming in well. Thousands of jars were brought in for the fall's canning, in addition to the ones made locally, and wood was stockpiled around the smoke sheds.

They had a fleet of over a hundred vehicles powered by the solar engine. There was enough converted farm equipment to provide for each settlement. The equipment at the lumber mills had also been switched over, with the result that they were able to meet the demands of

every community and export the excess to the Mormons, Sioux and Kansans. The brickworks was producing enough for domestic use and a small excess for export.

Eddie Loukachenets was turning out glass bowls, lab equipment and ornaments. He was teaching six apprentices and they were trying to create a rolling mill to form large sheets of glass, but all they were able to economically make were two foot panes.

Several of the freed Aztec captives had pottery skills and were providing a large number of clay pots for the settlements, both ornamental and functional.

Rumors came up from the south that the Aztecs were in trouble. The number of refugees had increased and Palo Duro was tracking a large increase in the population in the Arizona and New Mexico settlements. Trade had almost ceased with El Paso and the number of captives had slowed to a trickle. Only fifty had been turned over during the past few months. The seven that had arrived in the last month reported that the Aztecs were losing whatever war in which they were involved.

The Israelis had beaten off a landing near Old Havana and they discovered that the Bolivians were the ones causing trouble with the Aztecs. It seems that the Aztecs had met a colony of Bolivians and tried to incorporate them into their empire. They didn't realize that the colony was a new outpost of a powerful Bolivia and stirred up a hornet's nest. The war had been going on for two years, with the Bolivian Navy having just recently refurbished ships with access to the Caribbean. They were looking for a base from which to invade the Aztecs from the east, north of the Yucatan jungles.

The Israeli Navy was now patrolling to discourage the Bolivians from trying to use Cuba, again. Carl sent word to the Texans to beware of a landing at the mouth of the Rio Grande, which the captured Bolivians told the Israelis was the alternative plan. Israel had sent a message

to the Bolivian command that Cuba was off limits. The prisoners were released to deliver the message.

The Council debated on sending a message of their own, but decided that the warning to the Texans was as far as they needed to go, at that point. They also discussed the possibility of a wave of Aztec refugees and what to do about them, if it materialized. The Palo Duro settlement was consulted and they said that they could keep them below Lubbock, but that keeping them south of the Rio Grande would be impossible.

The population of Palo Duro was becoming large enough to support another troop, formed of the new recruits from isolated ranches and farms and the returned captives from the Aztecs. Trinidad and Gunnison were alerted to the possibility of an expedition to support Palo Duro.

By the time these preparations had been set in motion, word came that the Aztec Empire had been attacked on the east and west coasts and collapsed. The emperor had surrendered and the Bolivians had exacted punishment in the way of territorial and material concessions. They had loaded up their troops and headed south, shadowed by the Israelis.

That night, Zach commented to Sarah as they climbed into bed, “Bolivians. Next thing you know, the Irish or Japanese will come calling.”

Life settled back into normalcy. The Aztecs succumbed to the pressure that the Bear Flaggers brought to bear and retreated south of the Rio Grande. The Bear Flaggers immediately began to fortify the border. They also began a huge project to open up the Imperial Valley to settlers. The Arizona border was also fortified. Their legislature discussed the expulsion of Chicanos living in the area, but decided to allow them to stay.

Relations between the west coast and Jefferson improved after the expulsion of the Aztecs. Jefferson continued to arrange transportation of returnees from the Empire to the Bear Flag Republic capitol.

The Mormons, seeking to improve relations, allowed missionaries into Deseret. Their rationalization being that Mormons wouldn't convert, but the rest of creation would.

There were several brushes with reavers. Raphael had been acknowledged as the leader of the remaining Fundamentalist communities and he maintained constant pressure on the reavers. Small unit ambushes had led to large unit ambushes to all out assaults on reaver strongholds. There had been a movement to reestablish the Theological form of government, but this was roundly rejected. The various settlements remained cooperative, but melded into an even looser confederacy than before.

General March was becoming increasingly autocratic and paranoid. With the passing months, he had replaced the leaders of half the reaver bands, often assassinating them and attacking their strongholds. It was rumored that he rarely slept in the same bed twice in a row and it was common for him to move in the middle of the night. He had started capitols in several locations, abandoning them suddenly, but ordering the building to continue.

He only slept with virgins because he became deathly afraid of disease. It was said that a sneeze would drive him to move his whole court to a new location. He was constantly bringing in captured doctors, herbalists and, even, veterinarians to treat his imagined ills.

"It will be only a matter of time before he goes completely around the bend," commented Carl. "When that happens, there will be internecine wars between the reavers. Raphael can pick up the pieces and build a democratic state in the old New Jerusalem territories."

Karl finally got married and brought his bride to the ranch. She was as quiet as he was boisterous and had three children. This required that living space be found to accommodate the new family. Rather than patch on another room, Karl decided that a new house was in order. His quarters in the old cabin were turned into a school house and Harriett took over the duties as teacher.

Sarah commented that it looked like Zach wasn't going to be able to keep his peace and quiet at the ranch, with six adults and eleven children with two more on the way. Zach looked ecstatic until Sarah told him that neither was his. Zach got a dishcloth thrown at his head when he commented, *sotto voce* that it wasn't his fault.

Sarah kept up her matchmaking business. She organized dances and socials for the unattached young men and women. She had the help of a dozen others, whom Zach called 'busy bodies' under his breath. With the precision of a large military campaign, the women organized the events. Mitchell held dances and picnics, Rio Grande had rafting, Trinidad had the lake for swimming and boating. By the end of the first month, there had been a dozen marriages and, from all reports, that many pregnancies. Sarah thought that her efforts were for the good of the community and ignored Zach and Karl when they sang the matchmaker song from Fiddler on the Roof.

Doc dropped in at the bar one afternoon and joined Zach, Karl and Benton. After the usual greetings, Doc commented that there were seventy pregnancies in Mitchell. When Benton expressed delight at the growing population, Doc said, "I don't know. A big crop of babies is great for third world countries or primitive societies. There is a large infant mortality rate to absorb the excess, so to speak.

“Here we don’t have that. In fact, we haven’t lost a child at birth for almost three years. That’s amazing, even with the best of care in a big city hospital. Oh, I know that we have a lot more knowledge about health and maternity care than a lot of primitive societies and the mothers are taking care of themselves better, with food and exercise, but a society spends a lot of energy and resources on a child before it becomes a contributing factor to society.”

“Are you suggesting we re-institute abortion on demand, Doc?” asked Karl. “Because, if you are, I am against it. Now, I’m not a particularly religious man, but we have pretty much built a strong sense of family here. Something that was missing before the Breakup.”

Doc looked irritated and retorted, “No, I’m not advocating that. We don’t have any stigma about unwed mothers. Look at all the ex-slaves that Aztecs sent us who are now mothers. A lot of them have found husbands, thanks to Sarah and her Matchmaking Society.”

“Well, what are you saying?” asked Benton.

“All I’m doing is pointing out that we are in the middle of a population explosion. My biggest worry is training midwives and finding adequate supplies for the birthing process. Thank God for Madelyn Kirk and Rachel May. They have concocted some amazing herbal remedies, from salves to infusions to tinctures. They have expanded our Herbalist by leaps and bounds.”

“Have you had any trouble training these midwives?” asked Zach, sipping on his beer.

“No, not really. I have a class going all the time. I train them here, when I have time and they travel to the other valleys around here. The doctors in the other settlements have been doing the same thing, but the real point that I’m trying to make is that the dozen doctors we have are not distributed well. Trinidad, where there are a lot of children, only has one nurse. If we have an outbreak of something in the middle of winter, we are asking for a disaster.”

“Doc, do you remember how it was?” asked Karl. “The government was into everything and was doing a lousy job. We had socialized medicine and doctors were told where they could live to serve the community. And there were no questions asked. My cousin was told to move from Tampa, Florida to some little Podunk town in Wisconsin. When he refused, the government sent a moving van and a couple of officers and they moved him.

“I understand that there is a need for doctors in every settlement, but that is the problem of the settlement. The people in the settlement know the score. If they want to be near a doctor, move or attract one. I don’t think we want to force people to move where they don’t want. It’s a matter of personal responsibility.”

Zach leaned forward. “Doc, I understand your concern. Have you talked with the other doctors to see if they want to move to where they are needed?”

“Sure I have. Clint Finley, who got as far as pre-Med, has agreed to move to Palo Duro, to help Doctor Singh, but that’s all.”

“Doc, every troop has a medic, doesn’t it?” asked Karl. When Doc nodded, he continued, “Well, can’t you give them some more intensive training to, what, bring them up to speed?”

Doc rubbed his eyes. “What we need is a medical college, I guess. Yes, I can give the medics more training and keep training the midwives.

“And, Karl, I understand your point about personal responsibility and letting people suffer the consequences of their decisions, but I worry about an epidemic and no one to do anything.

“I’ll talk with the other doctors about training nurses and medics to take care of the day-to-day problems and, hopefully, we will have a doctor around for the major stuff.”

He got up and left, his shoulders slumped with fatigue and worry. The other men discussed the situation and, though regrettable, they decided that the government had no right to force the doctors to live where they didn't want. Benton agreed that any new medical personnel would be encouraged to live where they were needed and he would bring up the Council supporting Doc's training efforts and offer a government incentive to anyone reaching a level of proficiency, judged by a panel of three doctors.

When Karl and Zach returned to the ranch, they began clearing the land for Karl's new house. With an eye for defense, they built it across the road from the main house and offset from the barn, on the same side of the road. It was going to be three stories, the top being a single room with a three hundred and sixty degree view. The walls of this room would be reinforced with steel as a bulwark.

The house was going to have a large living room and a large kitchen. There would be one bedroom downstairs and four upstairs. With one bath downstairs and two upstairs, Karl figured that there would be plenty for expansion. Two smaller rooms would provide play space. Karl had contracted with the brickworks for tiles for the roof. A porch ran around the house and on its roof would be mounted the solar panels.

Karl was the contractor for the job, with Zach and Eduardo as general helpers. When necessary, the plumbers and electricians were be called in. It took a month, but the house was finally ready to occupy

Karl and Harriett had a housewarming party. Sarah voiced the opinion that it was a good thing their own house was fairly large so that Zach could find it when the party broke up. Zach looked dutifully offended and said he hoped no one would tread on his hands when he was

crawling home. That earned him rolled eyes from his wife and her promise that she would wear spiked heels, just for the occasion.

The party was a success. Sarah, Anne and Harriett had used the occasion for another matchmaking event. The barns were crowded with guests and more than a few marriages were arranged over the weekend.

The three men took the following day off and met in the War Room for some hair of the dog. When Zach complained about the noise the troopers made during training exercises, Jerry Carter, up from Trinidad and staying at the barracks overnight, told him he should have been present for reveille. After the doctored coffee had been sipped, they discussed the Aztec situation and the refugees and recruits.

“Samuel Ling still goes out and makes a sweep. He usually brings in a family or two, but he has about convinced everyone that will be convinced to come in. Now that the Aztecs have been brought down a peg or two, people aren’t as nervous about things,” said Jerry.

“The New Africans are asking more and more pay for refugees,” Carl said. “Katherine West doesn’t seem to have the clout we were hoping she would have. Michael Turner and Sam Kestrel still seemed to be in charge and weren’t relinquishing any authority. The war with the Mahdists is pretty much over for the year.”

Zach sat thinking for a few minutes and finally said, “You know, I have often wondered how many people there are left. We had something like six billion in the world once. The Caliphate Wars and the atom bombs must have killed off a third. The dirty bomb campaign killed off another third, at least, if you include the residual radiation and famine. Then along came the plague. This country went from four hundred and eight million to three hundred thousand. Since then, we have been killing each other off with the Mahdists slaughtering police,

military, politicians, religious and anyone else they deem unnecessary or dangerous. The Mahdists and their wars with us, the Fundies and the New Africans. The reavers killing for killings sake.

“Do you guys think we are increasing or decreasing in population?”

“What brought that up?” asked Karl.

“Just wondering, that’s all,” answered Zach.

“Crap,” ejaculated Wendall Freeman. “Now you got me wondering.” He got up and left the room. He was back in an hour with several books. “All right, here we have almanacs with the population figures, meteorological data for wind patterns, accounts of what cities were bombed during the wars and the dirty bomb attacks. Let’s figure this thing out.”

They spent the rest of the morning in hot discussion of the facts and figures. The final result had several different lines of thought with one conclusion: a lot of people had died and, at most, ten percent of the population survived, but more likely just three or four percent.

They gave up in disgust and fell to discussing the troop situation. Rio Grande and Palo Duro had each put another troop together to bring the total to twenty-four troops, most with over fifteen men each, though the Rio Grande troop was still a mix of young troopers and auxiliaries.. Gold Cove had put together another Ranger Troop and they were busy patrolling the western slope of the Rockies. Trinidad was getting a group of refugees from Texas and New Africa and might be able to put together an actual Twenty-three Troop, instead of one mostly on paper.

Early in the afternoon, everyone returned to the ranch with Zach, Eduardo and Karl and helped move furniture. By dark, everything was in shape and Anne, Harriett and Sarah fed the men leftovers.

That evening, after the others had gone, the three couples sat on the new porch watching the children playing a complicated game whose rules changed constantly. They were relaxed and comfortable after the long day. As soon as it was obvious that the children were tired, the get together broke up.

Chapter 27

Support for Kansas

Summer 2046

Population boom. Not unexpected when there are fewer things to do than in the old days. No movies, night clubs, bars, etc. Not a lot of extra time, either. We seem to be working harder and with longer hours and there is more of a sense of well-being than before the troubles. Maybe, that is what we needed, more work and less leisure time? No, I think it is working towards a goal. We are trying to rebuild a country, not just living off the results of our fathers' sweat and blood. There is a sense of life and living, not just existing. Who knows.

Karl finally got married. About time he made Harriet an honest woman. It was really hard keeping the secret that everyone knew about the courtship. I can't understand why he tried to hide it, but it is over now. Another home on the Ranch and a new family. More kids.

I agree with 'Doc' about needing to even out the medical personnel in the different communities, but that smacks of Fascism to force people to settle where they don't want. I would prefer that the communities that needed an occupation to find some way to lure them in with incentives of some sort. Our government, before and during the troubles, controlled a lot of aspects of life. They forcefully cleared a lot of people out of Florida for the Israelis and moved whole towns to the southern border to form a buffer. They used that retention thing they had for the military, stop gap or stop loss or whatever, to keep civilians in certain jobs they considered important. No, if Big Valley or Palo Duro wants someone to move in, they had better find a way to entice that someone rather than have government do it.

Zach woke to the ringing of the phone and cursed the day that particular item of civilization had been reintroduced. A trooper informed him that his presence was requested for

an emergency meeting at the Council Chambers. It was scheduled in two hours. He grabbed a quick cup of coffee and stuffed a sandwich and a couple of apples in his coat pockets while Eduardo saddled horses for Karl and him.

They rode into town and reached the Town Hall in time and jostled their way through the crowd that had gathered. The meeting was closed, which was unusual. Either the doors were open or an informal session was held in another location than the Council Chambers. They passed through the troopers guarding the door and entered.

Benton Robison, on his last term as mayor, broke from his conversation with a trooper operating the radio link to the other settlements. Zach frowned at this. The security aspects of open transmissions had been stressed repeatedly.

The harried man rushed up to them and said before they had a chance to speak, “I know, security, but things are breaking loose from all directions.” He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow.

Zach took his place and Karl sat in the audience, his arms draped over chairs on either side. The rest of the Council was present and Carl, Hans Minkema, Wendall Freeman and Jimmy Pinder entered soon after and sat with Karl.

Benton called the roll, another rarity, including the representatives from the other settlements. When that had been completed, he wiped his forehead again and addressed the Councils. “Things have been going along pretty well, as you know. The crops and herds have been doing well, we have discovered some important caches of supplies and we are adding to the population, both biologically and through new families coming in.

“We have been at peace with our neighbors and relations with our friends have warmed up. All-in-all, good times.

“Now, we have gotten word that things are not as smooth as we thought. We have had four sets of visitors, two are in town and the other two will be here tomorrow. We have been asked for help from several fronts. The two groups that are still on their way are the Texans and Bear Flaggers. I think we should hear from the other two, the Sioux and Kansans.”

He asked a trooper to bring in Proud of his Horses. The Sioux, with the big sounding name, was a small, compact man with wide shoulders and bowed legs. He took the guest chair and was introduced to the Council.

He nodded to each of them and began, “We have an epidemic among the children. There have been several deaths and many are ill. We have tried to quarantine them, but the disease is still spreading. We need doctors and medicines.”

His stark request and look gave impetus to the severity of the problem. The Council thanked him and he was escorted out and three men from Selden were shown in. They nodded to Zach and Karl, recognizing them from the recent action against the reavers.

The oldest man, whose round face was topped with a mass of salt and pepper hair and a long, drooping mustache stained with tobacco juice was the spokesman. He looked around for a place to spit and Gail O’Malley nudged a waste paper basket in his direction. He nodded his thanks and spat a stream of juice into the receptacle. After wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, he said, “It’s the reavers, again.

“That General March has gone nuts, we figure. They’re killing each other something fierce. He, March, that is, don’t trust nobody, like. He started off killing the leaders of some of the smaller gangs and taking them over and their territory. The rest got real nervous and began shooting back. There was a war going on and we weren’t too unhappy about it. Let them kill each other off, we said.

“Then things changed, like. The gangs started busting up and running amok. Our people started getting caught in the middle. Both sides started grabbing the yonkers and sticking them in the army. We heard that March was killed and every gang was trying to take over the whole shebang.

“Anyway, they have started raiding everywhere. We caught one of them and he said that they were doing a ‘scorched earth’ to keep the rest of the gangs from getting anything. We can’t keep up with this. We don’t have the men and they can’t get together fast enough to stop the raids.

“It’s getting so that we can’t even farm or ranch. A lot of families have abandoned the land to form into groups that can defend themselves, but so much time is spent on guarding and scouting that not much farming gets done.”

“What do you want from us?” asked Sven Beckstrom, over the radio.

“The biggest need, right now, is food and supplies. Some of these folks have nothing but the clothes on their backs. We got centers set up in Selden, Wichita, Tulsa and near Dodge, though the Dodge one got hit. There’s four or five thousand people and a lot more wandering around looking for help.

“The next thing we’d like to have is a couple of Troops to help fight off the reaver bands. We know you helped us before and it seems like you’re pulling our fat out of the fire again, but we have been trying to set up troops like yours and just need a little more time before we have enough to do the job. Selden has three troops and a couple of groups of rangers. Same for Tulsa and Wichita. To tell the truth, we are short of weapons and training and a couple of the groups didn’t think supporting fighters was necessary, what with the reavers fighting amongst themselves and all.”

He looked disappointed when there was not immediate call to arms, but agreed that they didn't have any choice but to wait until the Council could discuss it.

When they had been escorted out, Zach said, "We helped them before. What's changed? We had a good calf and lamb crop. There's a lot of suckling pigs and Thomas Faulk was saying that he was going to have to slaughter some chickens and turkeys before too long."

"Yeah, Zach, but that's not the last of it. The other two groups have the same kind of requests.

"The Texans sent a message that the Aztecs are on the move and have occupied San Antonio, again. Plus, they are under some pressure from reavers who are moving into their neck of the woods. Now that March is dead or ineffectual, they don't worry about his orders to stay east or near the Mississippi.

"The Bear Flaggers say that the Aztecs are shifting men from the south, where they were fighting the Bolivians, to their border. They have mounted a full-scale attack across the Arizona and California borders. The new settlements in the Imperial Valley are in flames and the people massacred. Their forces were spread too thin to offer any strong resistance and they are being pushed back with heavy losses."

"Can't they get some help from Madison or Oregon or Columbia or the other states on the west coast?" asked Hans.

"They are asking everyone, believe you me," answered Benton.

"Excuse me," said Digby Twill, his voice sounding tinny from the speaker. "The Sioux seem to me the easiest to help. It shouldn't take more than a small squad to escort the medical personnel and medicines there. Whether we go to war or not, the doctors and nurses won't be

going along and the sorts of supplies needed for the Sioux won't be needed for the field. Will they?"

"No, no," answered 'Doc', who had been asked to be present. "The only thing I'm worried about is having enough medical personnel around to look after the wounded, if we fight."

"Well, 'Doc'," asked William Campbell, "how many doctors and nurses are you thinking it would take to handle the epidemic?"

"It sounds like scarlet fever, from the symptoms. Though not usually fatal, it can develop into rheumatic fever and there can be complications leading to death. Some of the side effects are blindness, deafness, loss of hair and ..."

"All right, 'Doc'. We get the picture. It's not usually fatal, but can be. Is there any problem with you getting supplies together and heading out, say, tomorrow?"

"Oh, yeah. I'll have the nurses get the supplies ready today. John Seiler, are you there?" he called to the radio. When he got an affirmative, he named off a half dozen medicines and asked him to send AJ Gregg and a nurse to Mitchell.

After the doctor left, the rest of the Council took a deep breath while Benton asked a trooper to take Proud of his Horses to the hospital. Carl told another trooper to have John Otis get the replacement troop ready to escort the medical team. He thought it would give them some good, safe training. He was confident that the Sioux wouldn't let anything happen to them.

"So, what about the Aztecs and the reavers?" asked Luther Smith, over the radio.

Benton turned the meeting over to Carl. He took the podium and said, "The first thing I want done is to send Ninth Rangers to the Taos area. I don't know how many troops the Aztecs

have or what their plans are, but they can use that valley and hit north for Gunnison or turn east and hit Trinidad through Walsenburg.”

Harry McGregor, listening in from Palo Duro, assured Carl that they would start out that afternoon. Carl thanked him and continued, “We have been ignoring the Bear Flaggers, thinking they can handle the Aztecs themselves. They have a lot bigger population than we do, but they also have a lot more territory to hold. I say, wait until they get here and let’s see how much help they’re getting from the other west coast states.

“We had a treaty with the Aztecs about getting out of Texas. They broke it, so it is no longer in effect. Period.” He called for Daya Singh to get Ishar Singh to the radio.

“I am already listening, Carl,” Ishar Singh said. “What would you suggest we do?”

“Can you send out the Seventh Rangers to see how much activity there is around San Antonio, Ishar Singh?”

“We have them preparing now, Carl.”

“Good. When you know something, radio us immediately.” He called for Gregory Bronski and asked him to send Twenty Troop to Palo Duro and for Jerry Carter to send Twenty-One Troop there, also. He then ordered Paul Diggs to take Eleven Troop to Trinidad.

He turned to Ihro Masamoto and ordered him to Selden to work with the Kansas troops and scout the border to determine the seriousness of the situation there. He was also to escort any supplies that the Council would send.

He turned to the Council and said, “I’m canceling all leave as of now. There will be no one out on trading expeditions. If you want to send any supplies to the Kansans, please have them assembled as soon as possible.” He thanked the Council and returned to his seat. Later, Karl noted that Carl was pretty official when he wanted to be.

Benton thanked the War Council and said that they would be informed when the other contingents arrived. He also promised that the supplies for Kansas would be ready by noon on the morrow. A trooper was sent to inform Raphael's people.

That night, the communal dinner was tense. Karl and Zach had explained about the impending storm and their wives were understandably concerned. Zach remembered his oft-repeated promise not to go on any more expeditions and knew he would feel guilty if he went and guilty if he stayed. The men tried to make light of the situation, saying that everything had been exaggerated. While they took their turn with the dishes, Eduardo promised to take good care of the ranch, assuming that they would be going on one of the impending expeditions.

Later, when the women were putting the children to bed, Karl lit his pipe and commented, "I didn't know how torn you could get, having a wife and kids and all. I know my boys need me and I really want to go, but if I'm killed, what will happen to Harriett and the kids. You know that Harriett has a bun in the oven, don't you?"

Zach nodded his knowledge and answered, "There is nothing to worry about with Harriett or the kids. You have a share of this place and it's your home. David and Brandon are a big help, so don't worry about them.

"The thing we have to worry about are the wives. At least, you didn't make a promise not to go, like I did."

They sat in the warm late spring air and rocked on the chairs Karl had made.

A while later, Harriett and Sarah joined them. They both had mending with them. Sarah held up a denim shirt, looking at the tear that Zach had gotten in it during the last expedition. It was Zach's favorite shirt for campaign wear and he had thrown it away after returning from Kansas.

He exchanged looks with Karl and shook his head.

Sarah saw the exchange and snorted a most unladylike snort. “You don’t think I’m going to have you moping around the house, do you?” A spot appeared on the cloth as she bent over it. She dashed her wrist across her eye and swore. “I promise myself I won’t cry every time you go. Well, if I can break my promises, then I suppose you can too, Zach.”

Harriett gave her husband a stern look. “You leave me with four kids and I swear, I will haunt you forever. Now, what do you need to bring? And don’t you tell me nothing. You were walking out of your socks, when you got back last time. I’m going to pack extras and Zach will see that you change and wash them, understand?”

Both men nodded and gave silent thanks for the women they had married.

Later, when they had gone to bed, Sarah clung to Zach and cried herself to sleep. He stayed awake, stroking her auburn hair and giving it an occasional kiss until he, too, fell asleep. She woke him early from his dreams and their next child was conceived.

The next day, when Eduardo and Zach brought several steers to join the herd headed for Kansas, Zach was called over to the Communications Center, an office in the Town Hall. After putting on the headphones and identifying himself, he found that he had Corey Stubbs on the line. The minister from Gunnison was upset and wanted to clear up a situation with Zach. It seemed that George Saltzman wanted to marry Madison Goodrich and Tammy Platte. “Now, as you know, I don’t personally approve of bigamous marriages, but it was made clear to me that they were the law of the land. Caesar to Caesar and God to God, sort of thing. What concerns me is the ages involved. George is twenty-two and Madison is nineteen, however, Tammy is sixteen.

“Tammy is six years younger than George and it concerns me. And, I’m not the only one, either.”

“Well, what do you want me to do?” asked Zach, irritated that he was in the middle of this.

“You are the Justice of the Peace,” answered Corey, as if that made everything clear. “George said that they talked to Sarah about this and she said there was no problem.”

The light went on. This was one of Sarah’s few matchmaking fiascos. “Corey, let me ask Sarah what is going on and I’ll get back to you. Tell them that they will have a resolution tomorrow, will you? Thanks. Out.” Zach cut the connection before Corey could offer any arguments.

When he got back to the ranch, he approached Sarah with the story. She listened and nodded in agreement that he had gotten the situation right and went back to kneading dough.

“Wait a minute, Sarah,” he said. “You really knew about this? Doesn’t Tammy seem a little young to you?”

“Dear, Madison and Tammy were two lonely girls thrown together when they were slaves. When the Aztecs returned them, they were taken from a brothel. Madison has two children and Tammy has one. George met them at a get together in Trinidad a few months ago. Since then, they have met at a few more events and George asked Madison to marry him. She refused unless he married Tammy, also.

“George was a little surprised. He like Tammy well enough, like a big brother. Madison was adamant. They talked it over with Tammy and she was ecstatic over the idea. Not only would she stay with the only friend she had, but she has a crush on George.

“Oh, and by-the-way, George knows all about their past. Any more questions?”

“Uh, no. I think you cleared it up nicely. I will let Corey know and, if he won’t marry them, they can move up here and I will. How does that sound, Darling?”

“Move here to the ranch, you mean?” asked Sarah, teasing him.

Zach panicked. He was feeling a little enclosed as it was and the thought of building another house and having another half-dozen people around gave him the shakes. “That’s not what I meant. I meant move to Mitchell, in the next valley over, you know.”

When Sarah laughed and pinched his nose, Zach realized that he had been had. He pretended to be angry and growled, “Maybe I’ll get rid of you and marry a couple of young ones that can be trained to have more respect for their Lord and Master.”

“Yeah, like you would know what to do with a couple of young hard bodies, buddy.”

Zach patted her bottom and said, “I’ve known how to handle you hard body, haven’t I?”

Laughing, she ordered him out. He left with a leer and a twirling of imaginary moustaches. He rode back to town with William sitting in front of him to explain to Corey about George, Madison and Tammy.

‘Doc’ left with the supplies, two nurses and Dr. AJ Gregg from Gunnison. The Replacement Troop provided escort service. They took a radio and were ordered to report in every day at noon.

Second Rangers, with a small herd of cattle and sheep, a dozen pigs, chickens, other food stuffs, medical supplies and an assortment of blankets and clothing, left two days later.

Carl had decided that when the Detached Rangers reported in, to order them to the nearest settlement to re-supply, then join the Ninth Rangers in Taos. He passed on the frequency that the Ninth Rangers was using.

Twenty-one Troop had moved out to Palo Duro and the Seventh and Ninth Rangers from Palo Duro were on the move, also. Twenty Troop was on its way to the Texas settlement and was expected to arrive within the week.

The War Room was busy with reports being taken and the tracking of the troops in the field. There was no time for leisurely coffee and bull sessions. In the midst of this activity, the representatives from Texas and The Bear Flag Republic arrived.

The full Council was called and the Texans were interviewed first. Jeremiah Hopkins had sent one of his sons and two others to speak for the settlement that had sprung up around Lake Texana. Todd Hopkins introduced the other men as Wayne Jessup and John Romero. Benton introduced the Full Council and asked them what Jefferson could do for them. They reported that the Aztecs were back in San Antonio and they were having trouble with small bands of reavers. They wanted whatever arms and ammunition could be spared and Harry McGregor and his Rangers to return to help with addition training.

The Council members asked a few questions and found that the settlement had grown to several thousand souls. They had repaired the bridge enough to handle the traffic between the east and west sides of the lake. Before the new incursions by the reavers, the ranches and farms had flourished. With the coming of the reavers, they would lose one or two of the isolated families before a response could be mounted. Normally, they would be able to track down the band and exterminate it and rescue whatever captives they had, but it was taking its toll on the population.

The Council thanked the men and asked a trooper to escort them to the hotel and get them settled. Another trooper was sent to bring in the Bear Flaggers. While they were waiting, Carl

took the lead and said that there were few, if any, extra weapons left. They had sent the oldest ones and two boxes of ammunition for each weapon to the New Africans.

“We can’t send Harry and the Fourth Rangers, but we should have a presence in that direction. John Godwine and the Third Rangers are available and John is a hell of a woodsman and he has trained his men well. If they have been as effective against the small bands of reavers, as they say, then the weapons from them should have been captured. I would say, yes to John and no to the weapons.”

The Council didn’t have time to discuss the matter further for at that moment an energetic, stocky little man with bristling mustaches and thick glasses bounced into the room and hurried up the aisle. His booming voice and quick movements triggered Zach’s memory. “Colonel James Macklin,” he said, with a smile and rose to shake the man’s hand.

Zach introduced the rest of the Council and which was, in turn, introduced to his companion, a Senator Reed Thomas.

Again, when the introductions were over, Benton asked what Jefferson could do for the Bear Flag Republic. Before the Senator could say anything, Colonel Macklin leapt to his feet and, hands clasped behind his back, began pacing before the Council.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” he began. “Before we get to the meat of our visit, we, that is the Senator and I and all of the government and citizenry of The Bear Flag Republic, would like to extend our heart-felt appreciation for rescuing those unfortunates from vile slavery. We cannot tell you enough or in strong enough language how fine it was that you have returned our people to us. Not only did you reunite many unfortunate families, but you have earned our eternal gratitude.”

Karl leaned over to Wendall Freeman and whispered, “Never use one word where thirteen will do.”

The slight black man, who was known for his abruptness of speech, turned the laugh into a coughing fit. Karl gladly played along by slapping him on the back with gusto. Wendall apologized for interrupting and punched Karl in the thigh under cover of readjusting himself in his seat.

The colonel nodded to accept the apology and turned back to the Council and continued his oration, “As to the reason for being here, it is simple. The Aztecs are challenging us again. We, to tell you the unvarnished truth, were caught with our trousers down. We were spread a little thin on the border and our attention was the new defenses being prepared along the border.

“Unfortunately, the new settlements in the Imperial Valley paid the ultimate price of our inattentiveness. Those brave pioneers bore the brunt of the vicious and unprovoked attack. Many were cut down in the fields they were tilling, crops were burned, cattle driven off and, more tragically, men, women and children driven off to suffer the pangs and pain of slavery.

“What we have come to ask you is aid in returning those unfortunates to the bosom of their families and communities. Use the considerable influence you must have to treat with the savages of the Aztec Empire and implore them to do the civilized thing and send those noncombatants back.”

Benton leaned forward and addressed the two men, “I don’t know how much help you can expect from us. The treaty we have, or had, with the Aztecs was rendered null and void when they moved back to San Antonio.”

The senator laid a hand on Macklin’s arm and replied in a low, slow voice, “That does put the matter in another light. Thank you for listening to us.”

The colonel looked as if he was about to burst to his feet and Zach interjected, “That’s not to say there is nothing we can do. I am sure that the Aztecs are a little nervous about our reaction to their incursion and would be willing to talk. We have men watching the New Mexico settlements and San Antonio. We will try to make contact with one or the other and send a message to General Morales or Senor Cristobal, our liaisons.”

The colonel expressed his long-winded and enthusiastic appreciation and, during a pause, Carl jumped in with a question. “How did the Aztecs rebuild their army so quickly, do you know?”

“They did not have to rebuild it,” Macklin replied. “When the war with the Bolivians ended, they treacherously fell back to the Rio Grande hoping we would do what we did and did not have the foresight to see, we stretched ourselves to the limit reclaiming the Land of our Fathers. They recalled their troops from the southern front, now grown quiet, and sent them to the border lands. Then, with the treachery only displayed by the uncivilized, they swarmed across the border and subjugated the Imperial Valley and the peoples there. Our troops, fighting a fierce, but hopeless rear guard action were pushed back to the Tehachapis.”

The Council said they would try their best to get the prisoners released. After effusive thanks, the two men allowed themselves to be escorted back to the hotel. The room seemed to heave a sigh of relief, as did the Council members. They discussed the two requests and decided that John would accompany the Texans back to Lake Texana and institute an intensive training course and act as scouts in the area. They were to take two of the new radios and see if the modifications made by Norma Parsons and Carley Waggoner had enhanced the range of the sets.

As for the request by Colonel Macklin and Senator Thomas, Carl would send word to Ishar Singh to have the Seventh Rangers capture an Aztec and release him with a message from the Council requesting a meeting.

The Council, trusting to the rapport that Zach had with the Aztecs, asked him to be prepared to travel to Palo Duro in anticipation that the meeting would be forthcoming. He agreed to go when they got word that the Seventh Rangers had completed their mission.

They informed the Texans and the Bear Flaggers of their decisions and John and the Third Rangers rode out several days later.

Meanwhile, they received good news from 'Doc' and the medical team. The epidemic had run its course. They had started an inoculation program and would be returning as soon as they had finished.

Chapter 28

Matt's Folly

Summer 2046

From the Training Report submitted by Matt Busby:

...due to my negligence, eight troopers, under my care, were captured by reavers. Herein is included my letter of resignation as Troop Leader, One Troop (Scouts) of Jefferson...

A week after the medical mission returned, Matt Busby entered the War Room and formally requested a private meeting with Carl. Puzzled, Carl led the troop leader to his office, invited him to sit and shut the door behind them. He crossed the room and took his seat behind the desk, noticing that Matt, looking pale, was still standing.

When Carl had settled in his chair, Matt laid a folder on the desk. Irritated at the mysterious actions of the normally relaxed young man, he ordered him to sit and opened the folder. Carl quickly flipped through the pages scanning the contents quickly. He paused at the last page, picked up the paper, read it through carefully. He leaned back in his chair and reread the letter of resignation, again.

Looking at Matt, he threw the page onto his desk and snapped forward to lean his forearms on the desk and lock his fingers. "You want to explain this?" he asked, nodding to the letter.

"It's just what it says, Carl. I am resigning from my post with One Troop. Please, find me a spot with another troop as a ranker."

Carl sighed and picked up the rest of the report and started to read. After a few paragraphs, he laid it down and said, "Suppose you give me the whole story. I know that you were sent out with the Replacement Troop to do some evaluating. You were gone five days and returned a couple of hours ago. You have, obviously, been a busy lad to have completed this operation report in that amount of time.

"Now, that's all I know. Fill in the details, please."

Matt started woodenly, "As you said, after the medical team returned, the consensus was that they had fine to excellent riding and shooting skills and were ready for the scout craft phase of their training.

"John had done a good job with passing along his skill set, but he knew that any of the men in my troop was better in the field than he was.

"He asked you to set up a schedule and you appointed me to take them out for two days and bring them back. I knew a spot where the terrain offered challenges, but wasn't grueling.

"I wanted John along to learn along with his troopers. I think he is one of the best trainers we have. He shows amazing patience and creativity and, if his scouting skills were brought up to standard, then he could take over the Replacement Troop full time."

Matt paused, sighed and continued his report. He related how he had inspected the formation, removing all food supplies and allowing a single water bottle. There was game in the training area and plenty of springs and watering holes. In case of emergency, the river water was drinkable, after boiling, though he didn't plan on going near the river, since that was the traditional dividing line between the Caliphate and Jefferson.

The boys started to complain, but when Matt told them they could leave anytime they wanted, they quieted down to grumbling. With lightened packs they set out and turned east at

the Mound. He pushed them until just before sunset, allowing a ten-minute rest every hour to water the horses and an hour at noon to eat lunch.

Along the way, he pointed out potential ambush points and taught them how to approach without being seen or to avoid dangerous points and circle to throw any potential attackers out of position. Several of the boys muttered about how boring this repetitive drill was and a hot, dusty, unhappy crew made camp, roasted a haunch off of the antelope that John Wilkins had shot and posted guards for the night. Matt admitted that he was demanding, but felt that this kind of training was vital. He ignored John's suggestions that he was being a little hard on them on the first day.

Carl asked him why and he replied that he didn't enjoy the task and he had had an argument with Janice, his wife, before setting out. The older man nodded and made a note.

The next day, the training became more intense. Matt would ride out and set up an ambush, requiring the trainees to detect it and foil it. He had a paintball gun and a lot of pellets and he peppered the boys mercilessly when they failed.

Carl asked if he praised them when they foiled the attack and Matt admitted that he wasn't as supportive as he should have been. During the noon break, John had a long talk with him and he realized that his methods were hurting the troopers rather than helping them. For the early afternoon session, he 'lightened up' and made it a game. He had brought a supply of the energy bars that Kevin and Lucia Zierler had developed and he used them as rewards.

Towards the end of the day, they had come on a wagon that had lost a wheel. Using the techniques that they had learned, the troopers circled the camp and found no tracks other than the wagon and two horses. There was no tarp over the wagon and Matt was able to view the whole

camp from a small height. There were five women with the wagon, but no men and there were no weapons in evidence.

The Replacement Troop rode up to the camp, spread out in a skirmish line, ready for trouble. John and Matt rode at opposite ends of the line, rifles ready.

The younger boys were embarrassed when the women laughed at them for being so cautious. The five girls were all in their early- to mid-twenties. They said that they had escaped from the Mahdists and were looking for Jefferson when their wagon had broken down. They had been debating on what to do when the troopers showed up.

Matt had John Otis search the camp, his face blushing as the girls poked fun at their efforts. Matt and the troopers lifted the wagon while John set the wheel and screwed on the nut.

The girls thanked them and offered to feed them supper and, as it was getting late, Matt agreed. They set up their camp a little away from the wagon and ate a delicious stew the girls prepared for them.

A guard was posted and they rolled into their blankets for the night. When they woke up the next morning, they were tied hand and foot. The food had been drugged and the nine troopers were prisoners. Their weapons and boots had been removed and their pockets searched.

Matt demanded an explanation and the leader of the girls stood over him and laughed. "We are going to turn you over to the Mahdists, sweetie," she said lightly, inspecting their weapons. "There should be a patrol through here tomorrow or the next day."

"Reaver bitches," spat John.

The girl back handed him, cutting his mouth with a ring she wore. "Temper, temper," she said.

They were left alone while the girls went through their belongings and inspected the horses. They argued about selling them to the Mahdists or not and decided to keep them to sell in Missouri at the rendezvous.

The troopers were given a little water and ignored for the rest of the day. When it got dark, the girls fed them an energy bar apiece and another drink of water. Matt started a conversation and learned that the girls had been skags, but had poisoned the six men who had held them and started enticing travelers by appearing helpless. They had begun to trade with the Mahdists when they met one of their patrols while holding a couple of young men captive.

“We were going to make them our skags, but the Mahdists offered to buy them, instead and business is business,” said the tawny-haired leader, Monica Ward. “The Mahdists were going to take all of us captive, but I managed to talk them out of it. Over the last three months, we have had a very profitable little business going on. Sometimes it is just a traveler or two, sometimes whole families. If the marks are too many, we thank them for helping us and go a different direction.”

“What do you do with the loot?” asked Matt, genuinely curious.

“We have a nice little hiding place that will never be found. We are very good at keeping out of the clutches of any of the scum that get in our way.” She laughed. “We have quite a store of pharmaceuticals, both lethal and not.”

Matt lay back against the small tree to which he had been tied. One of the boys was crying quietly and Matt whispered encouragement until a blond called Bean with a narrow face and sharp chin gave him a brutal kick and told him to shut up. She also kicked the boy who was crying and gave him the same message.

When their captors had gone to bed for the night, Matt waited patiently for an hour and then began straining to reach his belt. He managed to twist around the tree and feel the smooth leather. After an hour of straining and resting, he was able to move it so the buckle was under his hand. He unbuckled the belt and pulled it slowly through the loops until it was free.

He felt along the length of the belt until he felt a tiny loop of thread which he worked until he was able to unravel the stitching and the two halves of the belt parted. Carefully working his fingers into the space between the two lengths of leather, he found a thin, sharp piece of metal. It was a blade from a disposable razor. Ed Johnson had shown the scouts how to undo the stitching in a belt, insert the blade and sew the belt back together, leaving a small loop of thread used to release the re-stitched portion of the belt.

It had been almost three years since it had been imprisoned there and Matt had forgotten about it until he was thinking of ways to release himself. The small blade had come back to him when he was wishing that he had a knife.

Working with the small piece of sharp metal, he managed to saw the ropes that imprisoned him. As he worked the blade became slippery with his blood as he cut himself repeatedly while sawing on his bonds.

Finally, the last of the ropes parted and his hands were free. Quickly, he freed his feet and set John free. Matt handed him the blade, but whispered in his ear to wait until he had a weapon before working on the rest of the troopers.

He crawled to the wagon and carefully reached the stack of weapons. He cautiously avoided small sticks and drifts of dried leaves and it took him the better part of an hour to move the ten yards to his destination. He was ready at any moment to abandon stealth and leap for the weapons if any of the girls awoke.

The only scare he had was when the red-head murmured in her sleep and turned over. Matt froze and waited several minutes to assure that the girl had gone back to sleep. He was sweating in the cool air when he started again.

He reached the weapons and carefully lifted a revolver from the box on which it lay. He looked at the front of the cylinder to make sure that there were shells in the chambers. He glanced at John and nodded. John crawled slowly to Timothy Stewart and freed him. John whispered in Tim's ear to quietly crawl to the weapons and join Matt.

One-by-one the troopers were freed. By the time the last ropes had been cut, half of the troopers had weapons which were trained on the sleeping girls.

Matt decided that the time was right and picked up a small stone and tossed it on the blanket of the leader. She started from her bed and grabbed for a gun, but froze when Matt cocked the revolver. He ordered one of the boys to disarm the girls, being careful not to step between them and the rest of the troopers.

The girls were disarmed and tied securely. Matt checked their bonds to make sure that they were tight. As he squatted in front of Monica to check her, she asked, "What do you plan on doing with us?"

Matt sat on the ground, cross-legged and thought for a moment. "We hang reavers where I come from. By your own admission you have murdered or caused a lot of people to be sold into slavery. That makes you reavers in my book."

She licked her lips and said, "We could do you and your boys a lot more good alive, you know. We could join forces; do this thing on a grander scale. We could be more than friends, too." She took a deep breath and arched her back.

Matt smiled and shook his head. "My wife would never like that," he said. "However, you could buy your freedom. Tell me where your permanent camp is and I'll let you live."

"Yeah, until you get your hands on the loot."

"The choice is getting hung here and now, or taking a chance that I won't hang you. Your choice. You will notice that we haven't molested you, which your former partners would surely have done."

He left her to think about it. He talked to the troopers not on duty and then went to the sentries and repeated the conversation.

Jim Parker had started breakfast. The troopers ate in shifts and fed the prisoners. Matt declined Monica's mocking offer to cook. After breakfast, Matt called the off-duty troopers together and assigned John Otis as judge and Mike Costler, John Gonzalez and John Wilkins were empanelled as the jury. The trial was over quickly. The five defendants were declared guilty of reaving and sentenced to hang.

John had made a complete search of the contents of the wagon and found rope. He made five nooses and threw them over a tree limb. The girls were put on horses which were led to the makeshift scaffold. The young red-head was crying and Bean was pale and sweating.

The ropes were slipped over the heads of the girls and Matt signaled to the troopers to lead the horses away. The reins were tugged and the nooses pulled the girls heads back and they started to be pulled over the horses' withers.

"Stop!" Monica managed to get out. "Please, stop!"

Matt held up his hand and the horses were backed up. "Well?" Matt asked.

"You win," Monica said, stretching her neck in the noose. "We'll tell you where our camp is, we'll take you there. Just remember your promise to let us go."

Matt ordered the women to be taken down and tied in the wagon. The horses were hitched and they broke camp. John Gonzalez sat in the back of the wagon to watch the girls and John Otis drove. Two troopers rode point and one each rode on the flanks and rear. Matt and Patrick O'Callaghan rode on each side of the wagon, near the rear wheels where they could keep an additional eye on the prisoners.

They came to a small homestead late in the afternoon. The house was decrepit and looked long abandoned. Monica nodded to the building and indicated that they had arrived at their destination. When Matt looked skeptical, she told him that there was a tornado shelter to the left of the house. They had concealed the doors. Several troopers were sent to investigate and John Wilkins shouted out when he found them. They pulled off the rocks and a couple of dead bushes and opened the doors.

John Otis led a pair of troopers with a flashlight down the cement stairs. A few minutes later he reemerged and told Matt that he better have a look. Matt rode over to the shelter and dismounted. He walked down the steps and was faced with crudely made shelves packed with canned goods, jewelry, silver services and utensils, boxes of shells for an assortment of weapons, weapons, including a machine gun, though there was no ammunition for it. Over the counter and prescription medicines were crammed onto a dozen shelves. Women's clothing hung on racks at the back, both formal and casual wear. From gowns to jeans; cotton, silk, linen, wool; shoes from spike heels to sneakers were all represented.

"These girls are bigger clotheshorses than my sister," quipped Tim Stewart.

"We'll never get all this stuff into the wagon," commented Matt, amazed at the amount stuffed into the room.

Further inspection turned up a bathroom with boxes full of makeup and hair products. Two other rooms contained beds and dressers stuffed with underwear, peignoirs, camisoles and a myriad of other delicate articles.

“How many wagons do you figure we’ll need?” asked Tim.

“More than we have,” answered Matt as they climbed into the open air. “More than we have.”

He ordered the men to make camp and sat on the rickety porch steps to think. John set two sentries and two guards and joined him. They discussed the situation and came up with a plan. They decided to stay for the night and start loading the wagon in the morning. They discussed the girls’ fate. While they were sitting there, one of the sentries hurried up and told them he had discovered something.

The two men followed him back towards his post on top of a small rise. The other side of the rise there was a deep cut formed by a dry creek. Along the creek bed there were six wagons, lined up tailgate to whiffletree. The beds of the wagons were filled with furniture, tools, tack and other miscellaneous household goods.

Matt and John thanked the sentry and returned to camp. They approached the prisoners and asked where the horses were. Monica acted innocent, but finally pointed with her chin to the west and told them they were in a sheltered draw about a mile away.

John Otis took the three free troopers, as much rope as they could find and set off. They returned a couple of hours later leading a string of horses and mules. They set to work hitching teams to the wagons. The tack had been thrown into the wagon beds when the horses were driven off. Soon a line of wagons was in front of the shelter door. The contents of the wagons were offloaded and the contents of the cellar loaded. Matt had prioritized the loading and a layer

of canned goods and ammunition was laid as a base in each wagon. Weapons and additional ammunition were loaded first, then the rest of the food, then tools and everyday clothes. When all the designated items had been loaded, Matt let the troopers load whatever was left.

The girls had been tied to the railing of the porch, their hands stretched over their heads and seated in chairs. They had been taken, one at a time, to use the bathroom in the cellar after it had been cleared out and carefully searched for hiding places. A single guard was placed over them while the rest of the troopers worked. The loading was completed by mid-morning of the next day.

The contents of the cellar and the tools fit in the seven wagons, but most of the furniture was too bulky. Matt ordered it to be moved into the cellar, much to the disgust of his men. He explained that they could return for it later, if the Council decided. They closed the storm cellar doors and covered it with dirt, rocks and dead bushes, trying to make it appear natural, again.

Matt ordered John Otis to start for Mitchell with the wagons. Tim Stewart had jury-rigged a tandem arrangement for six of the wagons. Those six only required three drivers, but it was a difficult job controlling a double team. Matt and John Otis had determined that the risk of a runaway had to be taken. The other three troopers would be needed for Matt's plan.

When the wagons rolled out after the noon meal, Matt, three troopers, nine horses and the prisoners set off in the direction from which they had come two days ago. Monica demanded that Matt keep his promise and free them. Matt answered that he never promised to free them, only that he would let them live.

She began to curse and revile him until he ordered her gagged. The rest of the journey was uneventful. When they arrived at the spot the wagon had been parked, they set up camp and built a large, smoky fire. One of the troopers was sent east as a lookout and the rest prepared

dinner. By the time the lookout returned and reported the approach of a Mahdist patrol, the prisoners were all asleep from the drugged food they had been fed. Matt ordered the three troopers to take up hidden positions when they heard the hoof beats of the patrol.

Matt, with a nondescript rifle from the cellar, sat near the fire, gnawing on a bone of the antelope they cooked for dinner. The five girls were laid out on blankets, still tied.

The Mahdist leader was a foppish officer who waved a scented handkerchief in front of his face. His uniform was draped in gold braid and was immaculate. His green turban sported a peacock feather, indicating that he was part of the Caliph's family.

He dismounted and, while one of his men was setting up a collapsible camp chair, inspected the girls. He used his riding crop to poke them, but they didn't react in their drugged state.

"They are drugged, then," he said.

Matt was relieved that the man obviously didn't recognize the girls. He had a story ready, but was happy that he didn't have to use it. He nodded and answered, "I got tired of listening to them whine."

The Mahdist nodded and sat down. When he had adjusted himself comfortably in his chair and refused the offer of meat, he said, "I thought there would be more of you."

Matt smiled and replied, "There are." He waved towards the darkness behind him and one of the troopers tossed a stone that landed near the fire.

The Mahdist laughed. "We have a need of young men for the Caliphate's army, not women. You radioed that you had nine for me."

"Women are always useful, general. The nine we did have attempted to escape. We were forced to kill them. I lost several men in the fight. This is a dangerous business we are in.

We have several waiting at the rendezvous and I can get them in a couple of weeks, but I thought that you should not go away empty handed. Their women were amusing my men when the prisoners tried to rescue them.

“Before you say it, I admit that we were lax and the men responsible have been punished.”

“So, I have come all this way for nothing?” asked the officer.

Matt pointed to the girls.

“Yes,” said the Mahdist rising and walking over to inspect the girls again. He lifted an eyebrow, “A gift?”

“A discount,” answered Matt.

They haggled a few minutes and settled on a price of two saddled horses, a case of 9mm ammunition and a case of .35 caliber ammunition. Matt also handed over a large bottle of sleeping pills and advised keeping the girls drugged until they reached their destination.

The Mahdist laughed and ordered his men to bring the horses and ammunition and load the women onto their wagon. Matt and the officer shook hands and the Mahdists rode off. Wiping his brow, Matt kicked dirt over the fire to smother it and faded back to where the three troopers had gathered. They mounted and, leading the horses, galloped after the wagons and the rest of the Replacement Troop.

They caught up with them the next day. They rode into Mitchell two days later.

“I came here to write my report and resign. John Otis took the wagons and the troopers to the Commissary,” finished Matt.

Carl picked up the report again and read it through. Matt’s story fleshed out the details. He tossed down the report and picked up the letter of resignation and reread it. He put the letter

aside and inserted the report back into its jacket. He squared up the jacket with the edge of his desk and laid the letter on the jacket. When he was finished stalling, he took a deep breath and sat back in his chair, his hands folded over his flat stomach.

“Are you a coward, Matt?” he asked in a quiet voice.

The question snapped Matt out of his funk. His head jerked up and he flushed. “No, sir,” he replied in a stiff voice.

Carl smothered a smile. The use of the ‘sir’ showed how angry the young man was. “If you’re not a coward, why are you abandoning your men?”

“I’m not abandoning my men. This action will save them. My mistakes will not get them killed, sir.”

“No, you’ll let someone else make the mistakes that get men killed. Someone with less experience and ability than you, but you’ll keep your skirts clean. Won’t you?” Carl snapped back, putting as much contempt in his voice as he could muster. “The great Matt will be able to sit at the bar and tell everyone how he would have done it. How he wouldn’t have made that rookie mistake. How he would have been the hero.”

Matt leapt to his feet and started for the door.

Carl snapped, “I have NOT dismissed you, trooper. Turn around and get back in that chair!”

Matt returned and sat rigidly. His hands rested on his thighs, clasped into fists.

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself. I don’t know a person, in or out of uniform, that hasn’t made a mistake. And a lot of these mistakes get others killed. They don’t run off with their tails between their legs and hide in a corner. They mourn the dead and learn from that mistake.

“One of your superior officers will make the decision when you prove that you are making the same mistake over and over again and need to be relieved. You can only request to be relieved when you become a coward, other than that, suck it up and do your job.

“From your report, you acted on that mistake, overcame it and turned it into a success. You brought in supplies and broke up a ring that had been sending young men to slavery or death. That ring of female reavers has lured, at least, six wagons of families to their deaths.

“I don’t know if I would have been suckered in by the reavers, no one not in the situation can say for sure. It was a pretty slick maneuver and, yes, it almost lost us nine men, but it didn’t. It didn’t because of you. You and Ed’s trick of the razor blade stitched into a belt.

“So, here’s what you are going to do: one, go to Charlie Wright and Harvard O’Callaghan and get them to make up a lot of those little blades; next, show William Lauer and his apprentices that belt; third, tell every troop leader to get a belts like yours for their troopers, if they don’t have one, and get the blades sewn into them.

“When you are done with that, contact every one in the Defense Council and tell them about the ‘helpless female’ trick and send it to our allies, too.”

“Now, get out of here, I have some real work to do. Go to the commissary and ask them what to do about the stuff you left behind.”

He started to get up and continued, “One more thing, I want a fitness report on the Replacement Troop. If they are up to your standards, I want to turn them over to Karl for combat training.”

Matt stood and hesitated.

“Something more?” asked Carl.

“Uh, yes, Carl,” Matt said. “If you’re done with the letter, I would like to have it back.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Carl said with a grin. He picked up the letter, tore it into small bits and dropped the pieces into his trash basket.

Matt left the room with a grin on his face.

Chapter 29

Further News from All Fronts

Summer 2046

I heard about Matt's little escapade. Carl showed us the report and told us the story behind it. I talked to John Otis and he confirmed the gist of it. That was a neat trick with the blade. I may have to get me one of those belts. If I get made a prisoner or get hurt, I can use it to cut my throat before Sarah does.

The rumblings of trouble are probably to be expected. There has been too much quiet. I always knew that General March was crazy. I hope that he has been assassinated or put out of the way, somehow. That should put a monkey wrench into the reavers' plans to take over old New Jerusalem. They will be so busy fighting each other that Raphael and his allies will have a chance to get organized and do something about it. I have encouraged the Council to do a little poking and prodding, but they feel that the actions they have taken so far are fine for now. I can see their point, if we commit to the Kansans, we will be out of position if the Mahdists make a move, or the Aztecs.

We still get a few families trickling in, but it seems that everyone is waiting for the hush to be over and they will jump when things get hot.

The Sioux have warmed up to us, again, thanks to 'Doc' White and his medical team. They got the Scarlet Fever epidemic shut down with only a few deaths and the inoculation program will keep other childhood diseases in check.

The Bear Flaggers are pretty confident that they can hold the Aztecs at the Tehacipi's. Too bad about the Imperial Valley settlers. I hope that the Aztecs are willing to talk about them

and include them in the 'Free the Slaves' program, though their breaking the treaty by moving another bunch of settlers to San Antonio may make that a moot point.

We are going to discuss the situation this afternoon. I am a little puzzled about the Texans being bothered by reavers. I have a feeling these are not part of the General March situation. They may have come from Louisiana or somewhere further east. Unless they slipped through Oklahoma, but there are a few small communities of Jerusalemites that would have made better and closer targets.

We are waiting on more reports from Taos. Harry McGregor sent a brief transmission saying that nothing was happening. No troop movements or general movement of people. The last we heard was when the detached troops got there. Harry has never been known for reporting in regularly.

Seventh Rangers reported that they captured a small patrol and gave them the message for Morales or Cristobal. Hopefully, that will bear fruit.

Speaking of fruit, Sarah is pregnant again. Eight kids plus Kay Moldanado. It's getting to be a mob rather than a family. With Karl and Harriett's four, she's pregnant, too and the Montoya's first, she's pregnant, too. That will be thirteen. Then there are the two adopted boys. Almost enough for a cricket team, however many they need. However, Kay may not be around for long. She has turned from a skinny, shy mouse to a real beauty. Sarah, Anne and Harriett have given her a lot of confidence and she has bloomed. That is obvious from the amount of attention she gets at the Sarah Marriage Fairs.

Speaking of which, they have been a great success. I cannot believe how she can get some of the oddest pairings together.

The Council met and discussed the general situation. They were leery about committing any troops to the threatened areas. As had been pointed out, until they had a definite threat about which to react, they could outfox themselves and put Jefferson in peril.

They finally received a report from Harry. The Detached Rangers had arrived and the two groups were patrolling. The Aztec settlements had been quiet, with a few warning shots fired at stray hunters who had wandered too close. No mass or unusual movements had been seen.

Ihiro had reached Selden without incident and delivered the supplies. His rangers had been conducting joint scouts with some of Raphael's people and had had a couple of scrapes with small reaver bands. There had been no serious casualties and they had managed to ambush and wipe out three small groups.

The Third Rangers had been successful with the new radios. They were able to reach Palo Duro, though the reception was spotty. They began training the Texans in both Ranger and Troop maneuvers and it was going well. There had been no new incursions by reavers since they had arrived.

Ishar Singh reported that the Seventh Rangers had captured and released, with the message requesting a meeting, a small patrol north of San Antonio. They set up a prairie post where they could leave a message in return. The colony was only a hundred strong with thirty soldiers. It was more of a presence than a settlement.

A week later, there was a message from the Sioux that a party of New Africans had requested permission to cross their lands to reach Mitchell. This caused a stir in the Council and they debated the wisdom of meeting with them. Finally, they agreed that they would meet with

the party and hear what they had to say. Carl convinced them by pointing out that they may have information on the Mahdists.

When they arrived, the escort was ordered to set up camp at the Mound and only the three leaders were allowed in the Front Gate. The full Council awaited them and Zach was pleasantly surprised that Jeremy Potter was leading the delegation. Sam Kestrel was also part of the delegation and he didn't try to hide his dislike. The third man was an obvious soldier. He was large and held himself rigidly at attention. He wore black trousers, a black military style blouse and a black beret. There were gold insignia on his shoulder boards and he carried a swagger stick tucked under his arm. Jeremy introduced him as General Charles Mogabi. He didn't speak during the entire meeting.

Benton Robison introduced the Council and asked what the government of Jefferson could do for them. Jeremy rose and thanked the Council for seeing them. He spoke of the recent flare-up in the war between New Africa and the Caliphate. The two sides had been in a stalemate since a series of successes by the New African People's Army. They had reclaimed a large part of the land around Lake Superior and had been able to hold it against repeated onslaughts.

The problem was that the Caliphate had become allied with the reavers and was getting Janissaries from them in the form of captives. This, along with a manpower shortage with the New Africans, had put their gains in danger. They were here to ask permission to recruit from Jefferson and to ask that supplies, weapons and ammunition be provided.

"Let me get this straight. After how you treated the volunteers last time, you want us to send more? As I recall, Michael Turner put them at the point of greatest danger because he felt they were Uncle Toms. He didn't mind getting them killed, if it saved his own men.

“Then, when they left, which they were free to do, other than in the middle of a battle, you sent troops to catch and kill them,” Carl said, sitting back in his chair and crossing his arms.

Jeremy looked embarrassed and replied, “I admit, well, we admit, that the volunteers were not treated with the respect they deserved and there were misunderstandings, but...”

Sam Kestrel jumped to his feet and said in a hoarse, angry voice, “They kidnapped my sister. That is why they were pursued. The crime of kidnapping is punishable by death in my country. I demand that you release my sister and turn over the criminals to me immediately.”

Jeremy tried to calm him, but he stood stiffly in front of the Council, his face a mask of hate. Jeremy gave up and apologized to the Council for his colleague’s outburst, but Kestrel sliced his hand through the air in front of Jeremy’s face to silence him.

Zach motioned to a trooper and whispered instructions to him. The trooper left the room and Zach returned his attention to the tableau before him. Sam was demanding reparations for the insult to his family and country and Jeremy was trying to quiet him. General Mogabi sat passively during the turmoil.

When it looked as if Kestrel would have to be restrained, the Council Chamber doors opened and Clarice Kestrel Thourmond entered the hall. Patrice was immediately behind her. She strode up the aisle and faced her brother.

She stood in front of him and said, “Well, brother, come to kill me? How dare you come here.”

Sam’s lips tightened into a thin line and he backhanded Clarice, knocking her down. Immediately, all was chaos. Patrice’s massive fist pulped Kestrel’s nose. Troopers merged on the party and covered the New Africans. Two troopers pinned Sam’s arms to his side and

dragged him to a chair, forcing him to sit. A trooper was dispatched to fetch a doctor and Patrice and Clarice were escorted to the back of the room.

Jeremy stood by and looked defeated. The man was looking at the other members of the delegation, but received a glare from Sam and an impassive stare from the General.

‘Doc’ White bustled in, after making sure that Clarice was not injured, and checked on Kestrel. The young man pushed him away. The doctor shrugged and left, commenting that a baseball bat was more in order than bandages.

When order was restored, Benton leaned forward and addressed Kestrel. “You are no longer welcome her, Mr. Kestrel and I no longer consider you a member of this delegation. I am ordering that you be escorted back to your camp. Any attempt to leave and you will be shot. Any attempt at all. You will wait there until our business is finished and then you will leave our territory and never return. Any attempt to return and you will be shot.

“Take him out of here,” he instructed the troopers.

When he had been escorted out, Benton turned to Jeremy. “In light of this, I can not, in good conscience, allow you to try to recruit any of our men. It is demonstrably obvious that they would be no better treated than the last volunteers. As to supplies, we will offer you twenty head of beef, if that is agreeable to the rest of the Council. In addition, we ask that, until the attitude of the leaders of New Africa changes, you no longer communicate with us except to exchange captives.

“We will continue to offer refugees safe passage through our lands and encourage the Sioux to do likewise, but do not expect any additional help from us.”

He looked around at the Council members present and they nodded. He polled the rest over the radio and they, too, concurred.

Jeremy thanked the Council and, again, apologized for the outburst. He assured them that they would continue to escort refugees to Jefferson via the Sioux. General Mogabi rose and marched out of the room. Benton asked William Smith to have the cattle ready as soon as possible and deliver them to the Mound. Matt Busby was ordered to follow the New Africans and make sure they left Jefferson territory and to inform the Sioux that the New Africans were no longer welcome in Jefferson.

The Council meeting broke up with the members discussing the proceedings as they left. Zach and Carl found Patrice and asked after Clarice. He said that she was fine; the only damage was a cut lip. He thanked them and hurried to the hospital for painkillers.

As the two men headed for the bar for a beer, a runner from the Communications Center stopped them with a message. It was from Ishar Singh, the Aztecs had agreed to a meeting at the same sight in two weeks time.

Zach and Carl continued into the bar of the hotel and sat at a table towards the rear. After Winston Churchill brought their drinks, they started to discuss the expedition. Before they were well started, Benton Robison and Grace O'Malley joined them.

"We heard about the message from Palo Duro. We would like to get this started as soon as possible, so why don't we go over the plans so the Council can rubber stamp them?" asked Grace as she sat down. She ordered a root beer and Benton ordered a beer.

"We need, at least, one troop and some power," answered Zach. "Robert Agnello and I should be there, since we know the players. Someone who speaks Spanish, without their knowing it, too. Emelio Rosaia might be a good choice, he speaks Italian, Spanish, English and a couple of other languages. That way, he could bring Yancey Miles and Big Valley Troop. I

would like to bring One Troop, too. We can use them as scout/rangers, since a lot of the ranger troops are in the field.”

Grace sipped her soda and suggested, “Luther Smith would be a good candidate, too. He is one of the younger members of the Council and we should encourage them to get involved in more than just the troops. We have to groom the next generation of leaders, you know.”

Carl approved of the choice and said that the Black Valley Troop would be added to the military contingent. Zach asked for the Beaver Valley Troop if Robert was being included, but Carl said that would leave too big a hole in the Old Settlements. That troop would be in charge of patrolling Beaver, Black and Big Valleys.

The informal meeting broke up and Carl said he was heading to the Communication Center and would let everyone know of the plan. They were to meet in Mitchell in a week, ready to set off.

Zach went home and told the families at the ranch. When he informed them which troops were being included, Karl was concerned that he wasn't going along, since his Ten Troop hadn't been included. Zach laughed and said that he was going along as a Trainer/Advisor and not to worry.

The week before departure was taken up with organizing a supply caravan to Rio Grande, Gunnison, Trinidad and Palo Duro. The regular supply runs were combined to take advantage of the trooper escort. A large mixed herd of cattle and sheep were being driven to Trinidad.

The four machinegun trucks were going along and Karl was in charge of them. There were some bugs he wanted to work out in a formation of troops and trucks and he figured that he could do this on the way.

The day the expedition was to start dawned bright and hot. The herd had left two days before. Carl had not wanted to have to keep to their pace for the whole trip. Eighteen trucks were laden with supplies, plus one for the weapons that Matt had taken from the reavers who had captured him. The Council, at the last minute, had decided to send them to the Texans.

With the usual chaos, the expedition lined out and they made the trip in good time. Karl set aside time each day for training and the pace was leisurely. The trucks bound for Rio Grande, Gunnison and Trinidad peeled off as they reached the turnoffs. The herd was turned over to the mayor of Trinidad, Andrew Montgomery, and his herders. After that, they made better time and reached the Palo Duro turnoff a day ahead of time.

There they met Sixteen Troop and Ishar Singh. His white teeth shone through his thick, black beard. He gave a hearty welcome and chided Zach. “You don’t think that you could leave me home knitting socks, do you?” he bellowed. “No, no, my good friend, who would pull your hide from the frying pan? Sixteen Troop will keep you safe as babies, don’t you worry.” His gusty laugh could be heard up and down the line.

The expedition rolled into the meeting ground early in the afternoon, two days before the meeting was to take place. Matt’s troop had scouted the area and declared it free of unwanted guests and the troopers set up camp. Rosters were drawn for patrols, KP and sentry duties. It was decided that Luther and his four troopers would be the honor guard for the delegation and were relieved of a lot of the mundane duty. While they were celebrating this, Karl informed them that all leather would be polished until it shone and all metal would gleam. Their cheers turned to groans.

While there was time, Karl began a series of exercises with the troops and machinegun trucks to try out his theory of combined support combat with these two different units. They had

different speed and mobility attributes that had to be melded into a single fighting force. Unlike tanks, the trucks had no armor, so there was no using them for protection. They did have greater speed and heavier firepower than the horse- or foot-bound troopers. Karl had the idea that the trucks would be used to break up concentrations of opposing troops for the troopers to mop up and the troopers would provide protection for the trucks in defense.

The next afternoon the Aztecs arrived. There were ten wagons and seventy-five soldiers. The Aztec delegates were housed in a large pavilion with heaters and servants. A kitchen tent was erected for their use with its own staff. Karl commented that it looked a little ostentatious and he mocked them by bemoaning the fact that the Jefferson contingent hadn't built a palace.

The Jefferson contingent had brought a large marquee, with table and chairs. A smaller table held refreshments; wine, whiskey, fresh squeezed juices from the Palo Duro orchards and water. Fresh fruit was offered as well. Luther's men were arrayed in their finest and stood to attention.

The Aztecs were represented by General Morales, Senor Cristobal and a tall, elegantly dressed man with a neat, white Van Dyke and mustaches whose points he kept patting with the palm of his hand. General Morales introduced him as Minister Montoya of the Department of State.

Robert Agnello took the lead for the Jefferson delegation. He introduced the four members and invited the Aztecs to partake of the refreshments. Senor Cristobal, whose English had improved since their last meeting, politely thanked him.

Zach was getting impatient to begin, but knew that the diplomatic formalities must be observed. Even though these were just the preliminaries, the Aztec clerk was frantically writing down everything that was said. Their own clerk made a note of the attendees and waited.

Finally, General Morales leaned over to Cristobal and murmured something to him. Senor Cristobal cleared his throat and began, “Senors, you have asked for this meeting. How may we help you?”

“Gentlemen,” replied Agnello. “We are deeply concerned about the settlement you have reestablished in San Antonio. The terms of the treaty explicitly set the northern boundary at the Rio Grande River. We, respectfully, ask you to explain this to us.”

Senor Cristobal answered, “You may know of our recent troubles with the Bolivians. Unfortunately, as part of the peace treaty, we surrendered territory south of the Panama Canal to them. This has caused a population crisis. We must find room for our excess or they will starve in refugee camps.”

Robert gave a low chuckle. “You mean to tell me that the area south of the Rio Grande to the Panama Canal, an area, which before the Collapse supported tens of millions of people, that area can not support a population of less than a couple of hundred thousand?”

“Senors, please give us some credit for intelligence.

“Yes, what you say is true, the land did support millions, but the intervening years have been hard. The jungle has grown over the fields, pastures are ruined with the fallout and there are bandits and rebels in the mountains and jungles. This land is fairly empty and will provide a safe living for a number of our citizens.

“Under the terms of our agreement, we should have informed you of our intent, but the crisis was imminent. Please, forgive this minor oversight.”

Emilio Rosaia slid a not to Zach. It read, “Just setting the stage.”

Zach nodded and slid the paper back.

“Just how many ‘refugees’ do you plan on settling here, then?” asked Robert.

“No more than two or three hundred and the proper number of troops to protect them,” answered Cristobal.

Zach spoke for the first time, “And how many would that be for a fairly empty, safe land?”

A hurried conference between the three resulted from the question. General Morales said, “We would consider three hundred fifty as the bare minimum.”

Emilio slid a note to Zach. “They shoot high. Will settle for 175.”

Zach passed the note on to Robert. He studied it, looked at his partners and nodded and passed the note to Luther. Robert looked at his counterpart and said, “A safe land like this won’t require more than fifty men, in our opinion.”

After a half hour of haggling, the number was set at two hundred.

Both sides rose and stretched. They both partook of the refreshments, Senor Montoya commenting on the cooling system used to keep the fruit fresh and the juices cold. Luther showed him the power converter and the cooling unit and, through the interpreter, explained the general principles behind them.

When they resumed the meeting, the boundaries were addressed. The Aztecs wanted the border redrawn from Del Rio on the river straight east to Houston. This would put the Texans under the sway of the Aztecs, something to which they would never agree. Robert proposed that the border start at Del Rio, east to San Antonio and south to Nuevo Laredo. The rest of the morning was spent with offers and counter-offers. Finally, as they were prepared to adjourn for lunch, they agreed on Del Rio to San Antonio to Corpus Christi.

During the lunch break, Zach sent a message to John Godwine informing him of the result of the negotiations. He asked him to inform the Texans and get their opinion of the matter. He further said to assure them that they would be included in any final decision.

Just before the meeting resumed, Zach spoke with Jeremiah Hopkins. The Texans weren't happy about the Aztecs being on Texas soil at all, but accepted the reality of the situation. He said that the Texas patrols had found no one in the area in question, near Corpus Christi, but there were small settlements of Texans at Fannin and along the Guadalupe River.

Zach whispered to Robert the results of his talk with Hopkins and sat for the next round.

Robert addressed the Minister, "Minister, under the terms of the treaty, the Aztecs are to turn over all slaves taken north of the border or any citizen of any state north of the border, taken into slavery anywhere. Now, there were a goodly number of slaves repatriated in the beginning, but there has been a noticeable slowing over the past few months." He spoke slowly, with many pauses to allow the translator to keep up.

General Morales snapped his fingers and sent a soldier out of the tent. Luther's guards tensed, prepared for treachery. Zach shifted forward in his chair and surreptitiously felt that the .32 caliber Smith and Wesson was still in the holster at the small of his back.

The soldier returned and whispered to the General. Emilio slid a note to Zach, "Slaves. Relax."

General Morales said, "Gentlemen, we should have done this at the beginning. We have brought with us more of your poor countrymen to turn over to you. They are being brought here now."

The delegations stood and exited the tent. A wagon with a dozen men, women and children pulled up. Luther spoke into a communications unit and a truck was brought up from

the Jefferson camp. Emilio Rosaia spoke gently with them until the truck and medics arrived. After a hasty checkup, the refugees were transferred from the wagon to the truck with their pitifully few belongings.

When the parties returned to the tent, Robert asked where the other one hundred and eighty-three were. The Aztecs leaned their heads together and whispered for a few minutes. After a shrug from the minister, Cristobal asked, "What one hundred and eighty-three?"

"The one hundred and eighty-three from the Imperial Valley. I would think that they, as captives from north of the border and citizens of a nation north of the border, they would be repatriated, also."

Another whispered conference was held. Emilio wrote, "Surprised them. Confusion in the ranks."

"Those people are not yours," said Senor Cristobal, finally.

"Those people are our allies. Regardless of whether they are ours or not," answered Robert, "they are captives and, under the terms of the treaty, they are to be returned."

Another conference ensued.

"Senor, it was our understanding that the terms of the treaty only included any who were captives at that time."

"Under the terms of the treaty, you shouldn't be back in San Antonio. The negotiations can be terminated and a declaration of war issued over that one point alone. However, in deference to the suffering of your people," Agnello continued sarcastically, "we are willing to amend the treaty as discussed."

"Now, the clause regarding prisoners cannot be enforced with a timeline. Simply asserting that the slaves in captivity were captured after the date the treaty was ratified, the

clause becomes null and void. So, the clause is in effect until the treaty is null and void. Are your assertions that the treaty is null and void?”

Another conference was held. Emilio slid a note to Zach, “They are a little confused. Morales tells Montoya a war is imposs. to win. Keep pushing.”

Zach slid the note to Robert who passed it along to Luther.

“No, the treaty is not null and void. We concede your point that there is no statute of limitations on captives. However, if I may point out, these people are prisoners of war, not captives in the true sense.”

Robert smiled and shook his head. “You are trying to tell me that children are combatants?”

“No, of course not, but it would be cruel to separate the children from their mothers, would it not?”

Luther, who had been getting restless as the conversation was progressing, interjected, “And the grandmothers were combatants? The pregnant women were combatants? And before you say that they can shoot, remember that a four-year old can pick up a rock.”

Another conference, more heated than the last, forced an adjournment. The Jefferson delegation left the tent and stepped away from the bustle around the marquee. Robert told Luther to stop grinning like an idiot, which sobered him up immediately.

“You made a point, Luther, but when you mention the grandmas and pregnant women shooting, you give them an argument. Let them figure those angles on their own.

“They are on the run,” said Emilio.

“Oh?” questioned Robert.

“They did not expect the question of the Flagger captives. They thought that this afternoon’s session was to set the wording of the treaty that would be sent to the governments. This has opened a new can of worms and they are nervous. Expect a request for postponement.”

Luther motioned that the Aztecs were entering the tent and they joined them.

Armando Cristobal stuffed his handkerchief into his sleeve and bowed across the table before he sat. It was obvious that they had come to a decision with which General Robert Morales was not happy. Minister Montoya lolled in his seat with an air of nonchalance.

“We have discussed the matter and will open separate negotiations with the Californios regarding their captives. Does that satisfy you, Senors?” Cristobal asked.

Robert Agnello looked surprised, “No, it does not satisfy us. The Californios, as you call them, explicitly requested that we meet with you to take up this matter. There is nothing to negotiate. As stated in the treaty, and conceded by you, all captives will be turned over to us for repatriation.

“Gentlemen, you are dangerously close to abrogating this treaty. Let me point out to you the ramifications of this decision. First, the settlement at San Antonio will be dismantled, peacefully by you or forcefully by us. Second, we will declare war on you, which will require you to open another front. Third, your settlements in Arizona and New Mexico are in danger. Fourth, our allies will support us, the Texans; the Native-Americans; the Mormons; the New Jerusalemites and, of course, the states along the west coast.

“That will result in the whole border going up in flames and may encourage further incursions by the Bolivians. Now, this is not what we want. I hope that this is not what you want. A distasteful, worst-case scenario which will drain our resources, result in more needless

deaths and the disruption of commerce and peaceful agricultural pursuits. All of this for one hundred and eighty-three captives.”

Minister Dante Montoya sat up straight in his chair as Robert’s speech was translated to him. His look went from languorous to furious. He slammed his fist into the table and spat out a stream of remarks to his fellow delegates.

Emilio had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from smiling. His note to the rest of his delegation read, “Mon. insists on war. Mor. says they are spread thin. Would lose. Cristobal wants to concede for more trade offs.”

Senor Cristobal waved his hands at the other two delegates to quiet them. He bowed from his seat and said, “We understand the points you make. We, too, detest war and, though our army has been rebuilt by the brave Aztec youth who are eager to show the same fierceness as their ancient ancestors, we, who are older and wiser, see no reason to unleash them over such a trivial matter. We concede the point and the captives will be brought here in a month’s time to be turned over to you for repatriation.”

“What about you simply send them over the border to the Californios?” asked Luther.

Minister Montoya smiled and answered to the effect that the treaty stated that prisoners would be brought to Lubbock. Since the terms of the treaty were apparently sacred, then the terms of the treaty would be followed and Jefferson could take responsibility for repatriation. Robert conceded the point and said they would accept the captives in a month’s time.

Senor Cristobal then asked that the settlements in southern New Mexico and Arizona be allowed to expand northward to accommodate the increase of refugees.

The Jefferson delegation went into a huddle and Robert Agnello replied that they had established a new settlement in the Taos/Santa Fe and Tuba City areas and any move into the area between the Aztec settlements along Portales/Socorro/Mesa/Yuma line would be unwise.

“With all of the territory generously given to you for the new San Antonio settlement, there should be plenty of room for the refugees,” finished Robert.

The meeting adjourned for the day and they agreed to meet in the morning to formalize the revisions to the treaty and sign the copies to be submitted to their governments.

The next morning, during the final session of the talks, camp was struck and, by the time the last handshake was finished, the expedition was ready to move north. Ratified treaties would be exchanged in a month, when the captives were exchanged. Ishar Singh expressed his disappointment that there had been no excitement, but that he was fascinated by Karl’s new tactics.

Chapter 30

The Storm Breaks

Summer 2046

Well, that was fun. Slight hint of retribution and a few well-placed lies and they caved. If they have. We will have to see in a month. I think they are doing the historical migration thing, reacting to pressure from forces to the south; they are looking to move north. It's a story as old as history, pressure from invaders; failure of the local food supply; climate change and a hundred other reasons have caused populations to move and encroach on their neighbors.

Emilio was a big help and they were sloppy. Assuming that we didn't have any Spanish speakers was either a sign of arrogance or naiveté. Whichever, it gave us the advantage. A little carrot and stick: give them a few square miles of land and let them know that we can take it back from them, if we want. I will admit, we exaggerated a little with our talk of the Texans and all supporting us, but that's diplomacy, I guess.

I'm looking forward to getting home, safe and sound. Karl sent a message for us to the old homestead to say that we were coming home. A couple of more days and I will be in my own bed. Sounds good.

The troops escorted the repatriated captives to Palo Duro. Carl, when he heard of the agreement reached by the two parties, decided to leave the rangers in the field, but recalled the rest of the troops. He would ask Harry to send the Detached Rangers to northern Arizona, since we said we had a settlement there, to put in a presence and see if there were any isolated farms or ranches or communities they could recruit. He passed on a 'Well done' from the Council.

Jasper Poole would take care of the captives until they were ready to travel and provide an escort for those who were rejoining their families or communities elsewhere. The ones who wanted to settle in Palo Duro would be provided with enough supplies to set themselves up.

Ishar Singh expressed disappointment that things ended so peacefully. He hoped that next time they would have a little more excitement.

The troops were anxious to get home and they set out after two days rest and re-supply. It was a good sized force consisting of One, Four and Eleven Troops from Mitchell, Eight Troop from Black Valley, Nine Troop from Big Valley, Twenty Troop from Gunnison and Twenty-one Troop from Trinidad. It totaled almost one hundred and twenty men, with the machine gun trucks and three supply vehicles. They took their time, spending time each day training under Karl's tutelage.

When they reached the junction of US87/64 and I-25, they found an encampment of Cherokees. It was a good spot with plenty of water and trees and graze for the horses. Zach joined Old Man Short and his nephews and ordered that camp be set, as it was late afternoon. He had a bad feeling about the reason for the meeting, but kept it to himself.

Short was smoking a home rolled cigarette and watching a leg of antelope roasting over coals. He looked up and grinned at Zach, Robert and Karl. "About time you folks showed up."

"We didn't know you were having a party or we would have dressed," Karl returned, cutting off a slice of the meat.

"As long as your rifles are clean and ready, you are dressed just fine," he retorted, cutting off his own slice and juggling it to cool it down.

Zach's stomach churned. "Here it comes," he thought.

Short chewed, wiped his chin on his sleeve and said, "You got trouble to the north."

Robert sighed. He knew that they would have to drag the news out of the old Indian. “What trouble is that, John?” he asked, attacking the haunch himself.

He pointed over his shoulder to the tree where the rest of the antelope was hanging. “He told me that the reavers are looking to wipe out Raphael and take over.”

Karl looked in the direction he pointed and asked, “You talk to the animals, now?”

“The other him,” John replied, turning the haunch.

Karl looked closer and saw that what he thought was another animal carcass was a man suspended from his ankles. “He dead?”

“Yeah, they don’t make reavers like they used to.”

Zach looked at the corpse and back to John. “How do I put this? That’s a reaver, you caught him, questioned him and he told you what?”

Short and his nephews grinned. “My boys caught him north of here, in Kansas, near Plymall. He and a couple of others were wandering over the countryside and looked a little suspicious. The boys stopped to talk to them.

“They were looking around for anything of interest, loot and such. Now, the boys thought it was a little strange that three reavers were out in the middle of nowhere and brought them home, well, two of them, at least. One didn’t want to come, rude, really. Actually, none of them wanted to come, but two were convinced when the boys shot the third. Mighty persuasive, my boys.

“Anyhoo, we talked to them and found that they had separated themselves from a big band of reavers that had been sent by this guy named Skull.” He went back to chewing.

Zach was surprised. Usually, Short had to be prodded and pushed before he gave up any information. This wasn't like him at all. It showed how bothered he was. He asked, "Who is Skull?"

John sighed, "We asked him that, too. Seems this Skull is the top advisor to March. By-the-way, no one has seen March in months. He is in seclusion and Skull is giving the orders. Make of that what you will, huh.

"Anyway, Skull has the idea that you are busy elsewhere and the leftover Fundamentalists are ripe and ready to be picked. Raphael is the mainstay of the group and getting rid of him softens up the others. Unfortunately, Raphael has bloodied their noses the last two times he tried a frontal assault. Raphael has some pretty good defenses and all. They have a new plan."

He paused and took a drink and wiped his mouth. He offered the canteen to the others and just shrugged when they refused. He tried the stew in the Dutch oven hanging over the fire and ate a few bites before continuing, "This new plan is pretty smart. They send in a force of two dozen men. Each has two mounts. They hit one of the isolated settlements or farms near Oakley and head southwest along US50, the old Santa Fe Trail. A couple of people get away and warn Raphael, knowing that he can't afford to have a big force wandering around.

"He mounts up three quarters of his force..."

"That leaves Selden undefended, doesn't it?" Karl interrupted.

"I told you, he has some good defenses. Oh, they could lose a lot of small farms and ranches, even a few communities, but he has to wipe out this threat. Usually, these raiders head back east and Raphael kind of chases them. Sometimes they catch them and sometimes not.

This will have to be an all out effort. He may call you, but you will take a week to get there, mustering and all.

“Here’s where the reavers have boxed themselves. You are already mustered and pretty near where they plan on ambushing Raphael.”

“How can a couple of dozen men pull off an ambush like that? You said Raphael will have most of his force. He’ll have, maybe, sixty men,” commented Emilio Rosaia.

John gave them a sly look. “Oh, didn’t I mention that there are nearly a hundred men waiting near Kreybill in the draws?”

”You kind of forgot that part,” Zach said.

“Yeah, they have been filtering in, in small groups. Moving at night and not bothering anyone. Well, not bothering anyone until they came to John Martin Reservoir. There was a couple of families there, minding their own business, but the reavers put paid to them, though the women may still be alive. You know how they are.”

Robert Agnello asked, “And these two reavers knew all of this and they told you?”

“They were scouts, really. They were to look out for you and us. Let the main body know if there was any of our forces in the field, so to speak. So, yes, they knew the plan and they told us. Oh, they weren’t too anxious, even with the first one gone, but we convinced them. We lost the second one the third day we were questioning them. We got a little antsy and got a little rough.” He pointed over his shoulder again. “That one was a little sturdier and we brought him along so he could tell you his story himself, but we got tired of his whining.”

“Okay,” said Zach. “But, you have kept pretty isolated until now. Why the interest at this date?”

“We have a few people just south of the reservoir. If they finish off Raphael and his people, then, to tell you the truth, we lose the buffer on the east. We’re next.”

Karl laughed wryly, “So, we fight your battles and you stay fat, dumb and happy.”

Short scratched his head above his left ear with the tip of his razor sharp Bowie knife. “It’s like this. When pushed, we’ll fight so we’ve decided that we put in with you, give these SOBs a good thrashing and we are all safer. If we get every one of them, this Skull won’t know what happened and won’t try it again. Everybody wins, except the reavers, of course.”

Luther, who had come up understood the gist and asked, “Why not just warn Raphael and let him go home, avoid the ambush?”

“Sonny, what do you think the reavers would do? There would be more than a hundred of them. Bored and with nothing to do. Do you think they would just go home like good little boys? They might head for Trinidad. They might head back to Selden. They might head south.”

Luther flushed and said, “Okay, I get your point.”

“No, sir, we have a golden opportunity to nail a lot of those guys and I think we should take it,” finished John Short and went back to eating stew.

The Jefferson delegation looked at each other and came to a silent agreement that they didn’t have much choice and it was a good opportunity to put paid to a large reaver force. Zach motioned to Karl to take over.

“What’s the terrain like at the ambush site, John?”

John smoothed a patch of dirt with his hand and drew in the reservoir, the road and indicated some rough ground where the ambush would take place. “There’s a spot north of the reservoir that has low hills and some creases in the ground that could hide an army. Now,

Raphael won't send out long-distance scouts. The reavers they are chasing will chop a small force to pieces and why send a larger one and split your forces. Just about the time they want to spring the trap, the chased reavers will take a couple of shots at Raphael and let them get close, say three hundred yards. If Raphael charges, good, they got him; if not, then they taunt him until he does.

"When he does, they will box him in. In this rough ground, there are a couple of small hills, with a slightly higher one to the west. They wait there for Raphael. He comes down the road and those on one side fire a volley, Raphael falls back and the other side fires a volley. The original band blocks the way west and another force plugs it up on the east. After that it's just a matter of mopping up the survivors. Boom, dead."

"Can we get a force behind them on both sides of the road?" asked Luther.

"Sure, if they aren't paying too much attention to their rears. But, we have to get them good the first time or we are going to be in a dogfight."

"How many men have we got?" asked Robert, a pointed reference to the number of Cherokee around.

"Well, you got a hundred and twenty. We got forty or so. Gunnison is sending a troop. We should have a hundred seventy-five or eighty, when all is said and done."

"Gunnison?" asked Karl.

"Yeah, we sent word to have them send anyone they could to La Junta to meet us. My boy got back just before you got here to tell me that they could muster a troop and supplies."

"You can't get more men? Just forty?" asked Karl.

"Oh, my boys are plenty fierce," John replied with a grin.

“Then we go up US350, here to La Junta. That is going to take a day and a half and another day to the ambush site. We could use another day to get set. Do we have the time?” asked Zach.

John scratched his chin. “They were to hit Selden yesterday. A day or two to get organized. A couple of days to get to the reservoir. Yeah, we should have time. One more thing; after we kick reaver butt, who gets what?”

Robert looked puzzled. “What ‘what’?”

“The loot, horses, weapons, clothes, saddles and stuff.”

Zach was taken aback. “Can we talk about this later, after the butt kicking?”

“Oh, we got time,” replied John.

“Let’s see, we have a hundred and fifty, Raphael has sixty and you have forty. That’s two hundred and fifty. We can do it by percentage.”

“We can do it by participants, that’s a third each.”

Zach could not tell if Short was serious or not. “Even with the fierceness factor, that’s a lot.”

John laughed and scraped the last of the stew from the pot.

Karl ordered One and Twenty Troop and one pickup to swing wide north. They were to take care of the east end of the trap. Zach and the other two sharpshooters with Eight Troop were to occupy the hill to the west of the trap. The road curved around the hills and anyone on the top could sight right down the road.

The Cherokee contingent and Eleven Troop would strike from the south; Four and Twenty-one Troops accompanied One and Twenty Troops and would cut off and attack from the

north. Nine and Thirteen Troops and the other pickup would hit the reavers on the west end of the trap.

Luther and Zach hurried to tell the troopers to mount up, taking only five day's rations, ammunition and their arms. They left within the hour, splitting into two groups. The last instructions were to scatter the reaver horses so they were set afoot. The rallying point, in case of disaster, was La Junta.

Just before they left John Short built up the fire to a roaring blaze. He threw some green branches on it and used a blanket to break up the smoke. He grinned at Zach and said, "Old ways of communication can still be the best."

He poured water on the fire and they rode out. Karl pushed the pace, sending a couple of men out as point. In the distance they began seeing riders angling to meet them or cut them off, depending on whether they were friendly or not. When Karl called attention to them, John Short chuckled and said, "See? The old ways of talking work."

As the evening and night wore on, more and more Cherokee reported to John and joined the column. At midnight they ate and slept for two hours. As the moon was starting to descend, they remounted and pressed on.

Dawn found them entering La Junta. Jimmy Pinder met them with a cheerful smile and breakfast. "Welcome, gentlemen, have some coffee. Just brewed it up."

Zach swung wearily down and did a squat to ease his legs. "Jimmy, don't get all cheerful on me, okay? At least, until I have had a cup of coffee."

They ate and slept for two hours. Jimmy had brought a hundred fifty remounts explaining that he figured that fresh horses would be welcome. The replaced horses were driven back to Gunnison by men he had brought along for the purpose. He also brought the Eighth

Rangers, which had been dispatched to scout the ambush. Mary Kendall and Adam Rogers reported in around the time they were ready to move out.

Jimmy asked, “What is the situation, Mary?”

“They have a camp on this side of the small mound. They are pretty relaxed, so they do not suspect anything. There are two men on the mound on watch, but they are asleep,” she said with disgust. “We could see that they have dug some fire pits on both sides of the roads, just within the trees. You will not be able to use horses in the attack from the north or south. However, there is plenty of cover, the trees are too thick for horses, but not for troopers. The bed of the forest is carpeted with needles and there will not be any noise.

“Bill Will, um, I mean, Bill Williamson, sent two men to let Raphael know what is going on, according to Mr. Short.” She nodded to the old man wolfing down bacon and eggs. He looked up and grinned and Zach, again, wondered if he thought this was a big joke.

“We are ready to stampede their horses and take out the guard on the mound, as soon as the attack begins, sir.”

They thanked her and sent them to rest and eat.

The advisors, troop leaders and allied leaders met around the fire and final instructions were given. They would wait until they heard shots, which would be Raphael or the chased reavers. From the time of the first shot, there would be a half hour until the attack commenced. By that time, the troopers attacking from the north and south would be in place. Jimmy would fire a flare and that was the signal for the attack. If there was any reason to abort, two flares would be fired and they would reassemble at La Junta, if possible.

Kim Song Il asked, “What about Matt and the others that left yesterday? Do they know about the flares?”

“Good question, Kim,” answered Karl. “Mary and Adam will be heading out and the rangers will get in touch with the others. They will all have flare guns and, if they can’t reach any of the others, they will give the abort signal. Any more questions?”

When there weren’t any, Mary and Adam were brought in, given flare pistols and instructions. Their fresh horses were ready and they set out immediately.

The rest of the troops mounted and lined out along the road. Cherokee scouts surrounded the column. After the midday meal, Eleven Troop and the Cherokees swung south and the abbreviated column continued on until they were met by a couple of rangers.

Bill Williamson and James Quinn led them to a point where they could see the reaver camp. It was deserted and quiet. The horse herd was directly below them, guarded by six men, gathered together and talking. Zach looked closely and saw seven rangers crawling towards the sentries. They hid in the tall grass, invisible in their gilly suits.

An hour passed and Zach continually scanned the sky for the double flares that signaled an abort. He tensed when he heard the faint sound of shots to the east. He marked the time on his watch and checked his weapon, as did the two other snipers. Their spotters checked to make sure their binoculars had the leather shades and were in good condition.

After five minutes, when the sentries attention were on the road down which they expected their men to ride, the eight ranger rose and used silenced weapons to kill them. After checking the bodies, they hurried to the mound and filtered up through the trees at its foot. A few minutes later there was a flash of light from a polished piece of steel to let them know that the sentries there had been eliminated.

Zach and the other snipers hurried to the hill and climbed to the top. They had a clear field of fire to both sides of the road. They could see a few of the chased reavers sitting their

horses in the middle of the road. Zach signaled to Rupert Winfield and his spotter, Mike Wright to take the south side of the road. He would take the north side and Lorenzo Newman and his spotter, Horace Stowe would take targets of opportunity.

Rupert, a black bandana covering his head and looking like a black pirate, slipped to the right and set up a stand. He whispered to his partner and began picking out targets in the woods below.

Lorenzo, an unsmiling trooper, had smeared black on his face and hands. For all his serious look, he had a dry wit that continually surprised the other troopers. In contrast Horace Stowe was a gregarious young man, but they made a great team.

Zach's spotter was one of the troopers from Eight Troop named Simon Johnson. He was nervous about the job, but Zach gave him a quick course on what was expected and he seemed to calm down. Zach had almost refused the help, but he had always insisted that the other snipers had spotters and they worked as a team and could not very well exempt himself from the rule.

The rest of the troop was spread out along the hillside to guard them from an assault by the western plug of reavers and to form a rear guard if they needed to retreat.

Suddenly, from the east there was a volley of shots and the reavers in the road wheeled their mounts and galloped west. Zach could feel the tension in the air. He glanced west and saw the Nine and Thirteen Troops and the pickup advancing. He turned his attention to the north side of the road and sighted in on a man wearing, of all things, a German PickelHaube Helmet from World War I.

As a crash of fire sounded from the south side of the road, followed a few seconds later from the north, he shot the man. His bullet entered at the join of the neck and head and exited behind and below his shoulder. He quickly shifted targets to a bearded man who seemed to be

trying to rally the confused reavers. A shot to the body threw him to the ground and, as he shifted to another target, his leg was jerked from under him and he tumbled a few feet down the face of the hill.

He heard Simon gasp and shout something, but his vision was blurry. He shook his head and looked down at his leg. It was sitting at an odd angle and the pants were torn and darkening rapidly. He shook his head stupidly, trying to figure out what had happened and everything went black.

He was carried to the back of the hill and Tom Russell, the medic, worked on him. A bullet, fired from the road, had broken his leg, narrowly missing the three major arteries in his lower leg. Moreover, the bullet had struck his tibia and broken it.

The rest of the battle was bloody and swift. From the west, Karl and his two troops smashed into the reavers galloping down the road and wiped them out with the help of Eight Troop. Matt, Raphael and their men did the same with the bottling force in the east. The two forces trapped and crushed them between them.

The Cherokees and Eleven Troop nearly eliminated all the reavers to the south of the road in their first volley. The few who had survived the initial attack had tried to surrender or run, but they were cut down by the snipers or attackers.

Resistance was stiffer to the north. The woods had more underbrush and there were a few moments of warning to the reavers. They were able to fire a volley before Four and Twenty-one Troops poured in a devastating fire and breaking them. This was where the majority of casualties occurred.

They rounded up twenty-two prisoners; the rest of the reavers had been killed. The Second and Eighth Rangers were chasing down the few who escaped on foot. The prisoners

were put to work collecting the bodies, stripping them of anything useful and piling them in a sandy draw, after the troopers had collected any weapons. Next they were set to collecting wood and covering the corpses. When they had completed this task, they were shot and added to the corpse pile and the brush was lit. Troopers were assigned to keep the fire going until the bodies were consumed.

The day after the victory, Raphael, John Short, Karl and Robert Agnello met. Raphael asked about Zach and Karl reported that his friend was still unconscious and had lost a lot of blood, but the prognosis was good for a full recovery.

John Agnello took a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket. He spread it on the table and settled his reading glasses on his nose. “Surprisingly, the casualty list is short. Raphael lost two men, the Cherokees lost two dead and had one wounded, Eleven Troop had one killed, Eight and the snipers had one wounded, Zach. Nine had one wounded and Thirteen, one killed, Jimmy Pinder. Twenty-one lost three and two wounded, one seriously when a shot hit a tree he was behind and drove a thick sliver into his eye. Four had one killed and three wounded.

“All-in-all, the casualties were light, though to the families and their comrades, they were heavy enough. Ten dead and eight wounded, two seriously.”

John Short, eating from a loaf of bread and a hunk of cheese, waved at the pile of arms and the clothing, shoes and other loot taken from the bodies. “How will that be divided?” he asked nonchalantly.

Karl looked amused, “Per capita, didn’t we agree on that?”

Short laughed and said, “You forgot the fierceness factor, didn’t you?”

Raphael, not having been party to the prior conversation, interjected, “We do not care. Our job was to kill reavers. Tomorrow, we will go home. We have a couple of horses we had to put down, so a couple of horses would be all we need.”

Agnello shook his head and told Raphael what had gone on before. He turned to John and said, “Zach and I talked about it on the way here. Whether you were just jerking our chain or not, we split everything evenly. That’s what Zach wanted and that’s how it will be, if you don’t have a problem with that.

John spat and replied, “You guys will never make good traders. You give up too easy.”

They buried their dead in a common grave on the mound. Robert promised to bring back a headstone and set it up. Raphael and John Short asked that they be informed when the dead were honored.

Zach woke up the next morning and was given a shot of morphine for the pain. His leg had been bandaged and immobilized in an air cast. Karl came to see him.

“How ya feeling, old man?” he asked.

“Better than how I’ll feel after Sarah gets ahold of me. Can you take a couple of months to get home, so I can heal?”

“Sure, you can walk. That’ll take you a couple of months.”

Zach drifted into sleep and didn’t feel them pick him up and tuck him into the back of a pickup. Three others, Paul Willits with his eye wound; Kenneth Campbell with a broken shoulder and Peter Russell with a leg wound made room for him.

The other pickup held an assortment of loot. Thirty horses were herded in the fields alongside the road.

Zach developed a fever and they waited in La Junta for two days until it broke. He wakened drained and weak, but his recovery was rapid after that. The column dropped off the Trinidad and Gunnison troops and continued north. By the time they reached Mitchell, Zach was limping around under his own power with the help of crutches he picked up in Trinidad, but, as he put it, “nowhere near fast enough to outrun Sarah and her pitchfork”.

Sarah was waiting with Harriett when they pulled into the parade ground, breaking tradition. After the troops were dismissed they greeted their husbands with tears and hugs. They had brought a wagon piled with buffalo robes and blankets. Zach was helped into the wagon and still Sarah had not said a word. Karl and Zach exchanged looks; Zach just shrugged after his first tentative greeting.

They drove in silence to the ranch and there were tears in Zach’s eyes when they topped the rise and it came into view. He realized how lucky he had been and how devastated the family would have been if he had been killed. He thought of the five new widows, some with children and some pregnant.

Anne and Eduardo held the kids back until they got Zach into the house and into his favorite chair. They brought up a footstool so he could prop up his leg. Still Sarah had said nothing.

“It was a stray, a lucky shot, Sarah,” he said and immediately wished he had not. His words seemed to shatter a dam and she held herself rigid for a few seconds and slowly turned around, tears streaming down her face.

“Lucky? LUCKY? You could have been killed. All you were supposed to do was talk to the Aztecs, but NO, you had to run off and get into a battle. ‘I’m always safe’ you said. ‘I’m off on some hill as a sniper’ you said. ‘Nobody knows I’m there’ you said.

“Well, obviously, someone knew you were there. THEY SHOT YOU.”

When Karl tried to say something, she rounded on him and shouted, “YOU SAID YOU WERE GOING TO KEEP HIM SAFE. THANKS A LOT.” She ran out of the room.

Zach began struggling to get up, but Harriett pushed him back. “If you want more of that, then go ahead and follow her. She got it out of her system. We were worried because she didn’t react at all when we got the news and only cried a little on the way in.

“She’s going to cry and pound her pillow, but it will be fine, now.”

She turned to Karl and ordered, “Let’s go. Your kids are waiting and you don’t know how lucky you are not to have gotten hurt, you big lug.”

Anne and Kay brought in the children and they quietly stared at their father. He finally smiled and said ‘Boo’ to them. After that they greeted him with hugs and sloppy, messy kisses. William asked, “Is mommy mad at you?”

“Yes, Bill. And she has every right to be. But we’ll leave her alone for a while and I will go in and apologize and maybe she will forgive me.”

Charles wisely said, “She always forgives me when I say I’m sorry and all you did was hurt your leg, you didn’t break nothing like I did.”

Zach laughed and Charles proved to be a prophet.